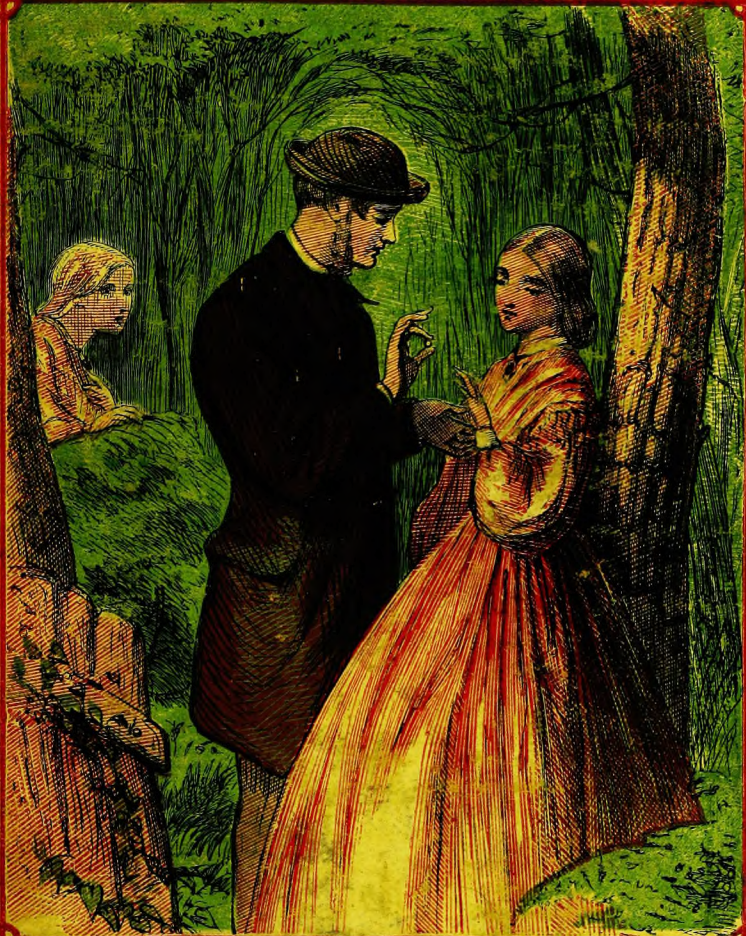


STANDARD AUTHORS ONE SHILLING

ENTANGLEMENTS



BY THE AUTHOR OF
"MR. ARLE" &C.

HALF-CROWN NOVELS.

IN ROXBURGH BINDING.

When ordering, the Numbers only need be given.

VOL.

- 1 Agatha's Husband
Author of "John Halifax."
2 Head of the Family

VOL.

- 34 Giulio Malatesta *T. A. Trollope.*
35 Tales of all Countries
Anthony Trollope.

3 The

4 Oliv

5 Mar

6 The

7 Rut

11 Sor

12 You

13 Con

14 Car

No

15 The

16 Lord

18 Cour

19 Bep

20 Wor

21 Deep

22 Mistr

23 Tilb

24 Doc

25 He

26 Lind

27 Rac

28 Lutt

30 The Kellys and the O'Kellys
Anthony Trollope.

31 The Macdermots of Ballycloran
Anthony Trollope.

32 Charlie Thornhill *Charles Clarke.*

33 Mattie: a Stray
Author of "Owen: a Waif."



JAMES H. GRAFF,

BALTIMORE

N. 2060.

ville.

erd."

lllope.

lllope.

inson.

larke.

lllope.

mous.

lllope.

ray."

lover.

ray."

larke.

ards.

erald.

inton.

inson.

ouble

lllope.

vol.,

lllope.

Tates.

63 Uncle Silas *J. S. Lefanu.*

64 House by the Churchyard
J. S. Lefanu.

65 Guy Deverell *J. S. Lefanu.*

67 Crumbs from a Sportsman's
Table *Charles Clarke.*

THE SELECT LIBRARY OF FICTION.

*The best, cheapest, and most POPULAR WORKS published,
well printed in clear, readable type, on good paper, and strongly
bound in cloth or roxburgh.*

PRICE TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE.

Containing the Writings of the most Popular Authors of the day.

Of the many cheap editions and reprints of works of fiction, there is none which better deserves the extensive support which they receive at the hands of the public than the series in course of issue under the title of the "Select Library of Fiction." In addition to the literary merits which the works possess in themselves, they present to the reader the important advantage of being printed in clear and excellent type on good paper, differing in this respect very materially from some of the cheaper reprints, which fall to pieces in the process of reading, and which so sorely try the eyesight, especially of those who are accustomed to read in railway carriages.—*The Observer.*

LIST OF AUTHORS.

Anthony Trollope
Edmund Yates
James Payne
Samuel Lover
"Scrutator"
W. H. Ainsworth
J. S. Lefanu
Victor Hugo
N. Hawthorne
Percy Fitzgerald
Capt. Armstrong
Mrs. Trollope
Mrs. Grey
Mrs. Gaskell
Miss A. H. Drury
Mrs. M. Caldwell
Mrs. Meteyard
Mrs. E. L. Linton

Charles Lever
Whyte Melville
Dutton Cook
T. A. Trollope
F. W. Robinson
Talbot Gwynne
Charles Clarke
Theodore Hook
Oliver W. Holmes
M. W. Savage
Tom Hood
Author of "John
Halifax"
Mary Howitt
Miss A. Thomas
Miss Pardoe
Miss G. Jewsbury
Mrs. Gore

Mrs. Edwardes

THE SELECT LIBRARY OF FICTION.

PRICE TWO SHILLINGS PER VOLUME.

The best, cheapest, and most POPULAR NOVELS published, well printed in clear, readable type, on good paper, and strongly bound.

Containing the writings of the most popular Authors of the day.

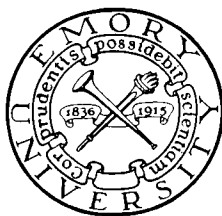
Of the many cheap editions and reprints of works of fiction, there is none which better deserve the extensive support which they receive at the hands of the public than the series in course of issue under the title of "The Select Library of Fiction." In addition to the literary merits which the works possess in themselves, they present to the reader the important advantage of being printed in clear and excellent type on good paper, differing in this respect very materially from some of the cheaper reprints, which fall to pieces in the process of reading, and which so sorely try the eyesight, especially of those who are accustomed to read in railway carriages.—*The Observer*

When orderin

vol.

- 1 Agatha's Husband *Author of "Jol"*
- 2 Head of the Family *Author of "Jol"*
- 4 The Whiteboy: an *Mrs.*
- 5 The Ogilvies *Author of "Jol"*
- 6 My Uncle the Cura *M.*
- 7 Olive: a Novel *Author of "Jol"*
- 10 Mary Barton *Mrs. Gaskell.*
- 11 The Half-Sisters *Miss Jewsbury.*
- 12 Bachelor of the Albany *M. W. Savage.*
- 15 Ruth: a Novel *Mrs. Gaskell.*
- 17 Jack Hinton, the Guardsman *Charles Lever.*
- 18 Charles O'Malley, 750 pp., 3s. *Charles Lever.*
- 20 The Daltons, 708 pp., 3s. *Charles Lever.*
- 22 Harry Lorrequer's Confessions *Charles Lever.*

ROBERT W. WOODRUFF
LIBRARY



be given.

- Gwynne, 630 pp., 3s. *Charles Lever.*
- Abroad, 672 pp., 3s. *Charles Lever.*
- oghue *Charles Lever.*
- 704 pp., 3s. *Charles Lever.*
- unn, 772 pp., 3s. *Charles Lever.*
- Glencore *Charles Lever.*
- shel, 618 pp. *Charles Lever.*
- 35 One of Them *Charles Lever.*
- 36 The Orphans and Caleb Field *Mrs. Oliphant.*
- 38 Mary Seaham *Mrs. Grey.*
- 39 Adventures of a Clever Woman *Mrs. Trollope.*
- 42 Martins of Cro' Martin, 704 pp., 3s. *Charles Lever.*
- 46 Jacob Bendixen *Mary Howitt.*
- 48 Sir Jasper Carew *Charles Lever.*
- 49 Mrs Mathews *Mrs. Trollope.*
- 50 Marian Withers *Geraldine Jewsbury.*

ENTANGLEMENTS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"MR. ARLE," "CASTE," ETC. ETC.

NEW EDITION.

LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

ENTANGLEMENTS.

CHAPTER I.

THE HALL.

BRAMBLEBRIDGE HALL, gleaming with numberless quaint windows—some, like sullen eyes, deep-set beneath heavy brows, some, like more prominent orbs, catching the light on all sides, seeming ever on the watch—lifts its many grey gables, its fantastically varied stacks of twisted chimneys, loftier than all, its curious campanile, in which hangs the bell of many legends, far above the Bramblebridge woods, which ripple away below it, sloping downwards mile after mile, to overhang the sea in Bramblebridge Cove—to overhang it not only with drooping boughs, but also with bared roots projecting from the cliffs, telling of the violence of the winter storms, which sometimes strewn the shore of Southsand Bay (near which no timber grows) with branches, limbs, and even trunks of trees, torn from the woods of Bramblebridge.

The long west front of the Hall looks forth with a frowning face, scarred by the inclemencies of wind and weather, thickly encrusted with mosses and lichens, for the most part golden brown, or greenish black, but here and there of an ominous blood red. In its centre, more prominent than the rest of the building, heavy with grotesque sculpture, and surmounted by the Bramblebridge arms, is the principal entrance. The Bramblebridges were a family who have so long died out, that when

they built this mansion—naming it, themselves, and the whole estate, from the natural bridge of bramble-garlanded grey rock, beneath which a mountain torrent makes a fine fall, tumbling on towards the sea—it is not now easy to ascertain. This principal entrance is esteemed to be architecturally noteworthy. Three richly decorated arches, supported by pillars elaborately ornate, form open doorways to a portico, which, at either end, is farther lighted by a mullioned window. From this portico a ponderous door of oak and iron admits you to the hall. Oak raftered and panelled with carved oak, this vast hall is pervaded by a subdued cathedral light, for opposite the entrance door is the famed painted window which lights the grand staircase.

From this hall are many ways of egress. Some, concealed behind old pictures, have been long unused, perhaps even forgotten; others proclaim themselves by much elaborate ornament. Among the latter are the doors opening, on one side, into the great ball-room, on the other into the grand banqueting chamber; and those opening into passages which communicate with other parts of the house.

This west front—containing also, over those state rooms, the great drawing-room and many spacious sleeping apartments—has often been shut up and uninhabited for a quarter of a century at a time. Before it is neither shrubbery, lawn, nor flower-garden. A straight road through the wood,—uncompromisingly straight as a tramway, and therefore steep, though a little humouring of the ground would have made the ascent gentle,—stops abruptly at the gates of wrought iron, which are as famous as the painted window. These gates open into a gravelled court enclosed by a sculptured wall, overhung by the wood, which encroaches year after year; so that some crumbling stone is often displaced by a tempest-tossed branch, and falls into the court below.

From this court a flight of steps, grand from their massiveness and fine proportion, ascends to the terrace. Standing at the head of these steps, you may shiver on a hot summer

noon. In the calmest weather the wind seems to sob and moan there, drafting up from the sea through the opening in the wood, or sweeping down from the bleak moor round the northern angle of the house.

Approached from the south, by a road that, leaving the coast near Southsand Castle, crosses a heathery common, and then winds up the wooded gorge, at the bottom of which, bragging all the way of its wonderful leap at the Fall, the stream brawls, the Hall presents a different face, and produces a far pleasanter impression.

From this south side, which is indeed a mansion complete in itself, the wood is kept at a greater distance. A succession of terrace walks, and broad flights of shallow, balustraded steps leading from one to another, descend to an artificially levelled garden; a very cup of sunshine, fit to be the pleasure of fair ladies, resembling its roses and lilies. Beyond this, through a thicket of flowering shrubs, you may reach the wood, and lose yourself among a perplexity of narrow paths.

The architecture of this side of the Hall is irregular; many of the mullioned windows have been replaced by oriels, which, projecting here and there, seem as if they had been thrown out at different times by different owners of the place, to command some particular beauty of the landscape: a bold headland of the distant coast, perhaps, the flash of the Fall beneath the rocky bridge (a sight the latest owner of the Hall would willingly have shut out), the oasis of verdant pasture land encircling the forest farm, a sweep of the "sheep-trimmed" Downs, the wreath of blue smoke curling up from the hidden gamekeeper's cottage, or the crests of the gigantic pines growing near it, which lift themselves darkly above the surrounding wood.

It is only from the western windows that you can see the black spot made by cypresses and yews growing about that Pool, concerning which, even in the time of the Bramble-bridges, ugly stories had begun to be told; though, doubtless,

it was once but an innocent fish-pond, curiously contrived by some fish-loving Bramblebridge, and fed from a hidden source. Now it was sullen and stagnant, and believed by the people about to be, in its centre, fathomless.

Supported by grotesque brackets and overhanging the arched south entrance, there is an oriel window of unusual size, from each end of which an outside stone staircase, evidently of much later date than the window itself, descends upon the terrace. One of these flights of steps is worn as if by much use, while the other shows no sign of wear. The secret of this is only to be learnt from within.

The Bramblebridges were a Catholic family. This large oriel is the window of a room that was used as the oratory, the door of which is so concealed that any one as unobservant as the generality of mankind, might pass it on the staircase day after day for years, and not be aware of its existence. From this oratory open two other rooms, with smaller oriels, which can be reached no other way. Within the oratory window is an oaken dais, one end of which is worn, as are the steps without at that same end. On that side the window is so contrived as to open to the level of the dais, as our modern door-windows open to the ground; wood, carved and painted to resemble stone, having here been substituted for the solid masonry of the corresponding parts in the centre and other side.

While the fact that one flight only of those stone-steps is worn by use is easily accounted for by the other fact that only the corresponding end of the oriel can be opened, it is not easy to decide which of the many stories about the Hall in olden times, that try to account for the wear of the oak within and the stone without, has the greater show of probability about it.

It is not with the Hall in those dark times—the days of the Bramblebridges—that we have to do.

CHAPTER II.

MR. DOWNSIDE'S FIRST WIFE.

AFTER the mysterious death of the last of those Bramblebridges, the Hall stood empty long, and fell into disrepair.

At this time it acquired the reputation of being haunted. It was said that the great bell in the campanile was rung by invisible agency—sometimes with such violence that its tongue was heard by fishermen on the shore of Southsand Bay, by the townspeople of Deerhurst, by shepherds on the Downs, and sailors far out at sea.

There was also a story about a clock, built into the wall in the course of some alteration, which struck at long intervals, though it had run down centuries ago and never been rewound.

The Bramblebridge estate at last, however, found a purchaser—a man not likely to be daunted by these stories, or by stories far worse than these.

This first Downside of Bramblebridge was not an ancestor to be ashamed of; though he himself knew no ancestry of which to be either ashamed or proud. He was a man who had commanded and deserved success: his biography has been written and re-written, as an incentive to youthful ambition and virtue. He was a man whom most other men were content to take as they found him; he being so emphatically himself that it did not occur to them to ask—What was he? Whence came he?

Bramblebridge as an estate had a glorious individuality; so had Ralph Downside as a man: possessing himself of it he greatly delighted in it, and delighted to make others delight in it. While he lived there was life indeed at the Hall—world-enjoying, and withal God-fearing and duty-doing life.

His son, his grandson, his great grandson, and his great, great grandson, were, in succession, each less worthy than the former of their ancestor and their inheritance. It seemed as

if, in each generation, wealth and luxury wiped out something more of individuality from the softening nature, and yet forbore to stamp vice where it found weakness. Some old writer has said—"Weak men often, from the very principle of their weakness, derive a certain susceptibility, delicacy, and taste, which render them, in these particulars, much superior to men of stronger and more consistent minds, who laugh at them." However this may hold as a general statement, it is certain that the last Downside of Bramblebridge, essentially a weak man, had just these qualities to an unusual degree: these qualities, and an exceeding affectionateness of disposition, would have been his only distinguishing characteristics, had not the extraordinary experiences of his life stamped him with peculiarities of look and manner—a ghost-seeing look, and a melancholy and abstracted manner—which could hardly fail to attract attention and remark.

Yet, strong as he was, through, or in spite of his weakness, in some of the attributes which go so far towards distinguishing the conventional gentleman (using the word in any large sense), this last Downside was surely less a gentleman than his peasant-born ancestor. He utterly wanted the "bred in the bone" courage, without which there can be no gentleness of that true kind which results, not from the negations of weakness, but from the full possession and full control of strength: a courage which is the marked characteristic both of the uncowed peasant who fears no man he knows, and of the undaunted noble who knows no man to fear;—two extreme classes which, as has been remarked by a recent writer, have more in common than has either with those between.

In all the drama of his life, Mr. Downside had shown himself a coward, with that cowardice which shrinks from inflicting even more than from suffering pain. Though now past middle life, and the drama, as he thought, played out, he enjoyed a negative sort of popularity, as a worthy man peaceably inclined, liberal in his opinions and also in his practice; yet at one time he had been a notorious person,

public feeling running strong against him through a whole county.

It had been supposed that, if he would, he might have cleared up the mystery of motive attaching to the tragedy of the Hall in his time; but now that tragedy was a long-told tale, about which people had ceased to speculate. Many years since, while still a comparatively young man, he had been left a second time a widower; his only companion, in the retired life he led at the Hall, being the daughter of his second wife.

Because it affects, at least, the atmosphere of this later story, something of an earlier story must be briefly told.

The lady known as Mr. Downside's first wife—always called the Lady Maria—was of a high and proud Roman Catholic family. It was reported that she had been the wooer, that Mr. Downside married her in obedience to his father's wish, at a time when the unhappy ending of some young man's romance of love had plunged him into profound depression.

From the first, it was said that the Lady Maria showed excessive jealousy: she had about her those ready to encourage this feeling—a priest and an old nurse, who had accompanied her from her home. After the lady's death, it was shown that there had been madness in her family for many generations.

When two children had been born, for whom the father's fondness was excessive, things promised to go more smoothly between the melancholy husband and the jealous wife. It was just in this dawn of fair weather that the crash came. One Midsummer-day, her husband absent on some unexplained business, this unhappy Lady Maria, restless, perhaps, through jealousy, took her children and two young nurses, and went to spend an afternoon in the wood; choosing a little sunny glade—the spot is shown now—where the turf is short and dry and the wild wood strawberries are always abundant, as the resting-place. To this spot, in the course of the afternoon, the old priest followed her, bringing a letter, which, the

servants heard him say, had been left at the Hall by a stranger. He gave it into the lady's hand and went away.

Her baby-daughter was asleep on her lap, her boy was playing at her feet, when she received the letter into her hand. Before she opened it she told the servants they might, if they chose, go farther into the wood, to gather strawberries for themselves—leaving her to take care of the children. The girls went; wandering off out of sight or hearing, they lost themselves in the wood; carelessly glad to be free from nurse's surveillance for a few hours, they thought of nothing else.

Returning at last to the spot where they had left their mistress and the children, they were filled with alarm to find them gone; but only the natural alarm at the prospect of a scolding from the grim old nurse, perhaps even of dismissal.

Reaching the Hall, they slipped in at a side entrance, and kept aloof from the nursery domain; till hearing that their mistress and the children had not, as they imagined to have been the case, returned to the house, they forgot their selfish fears, presented themselves, and made tearful confession.

The alarm once given, the household poured forth on the search. There were only left within, the priest at prayers in the oratory; old Mr. Downside, confined to his sick bed, the servant attending him; the nurse and the butler, both of whom were too infirm to stir far.

All search proved fruitless, till some awe-struck whisperer suggested the neighbourhood of the Pool as almost the only spot that had been left unexplored. It chanced that the game-keeper's cottage, which was near this Pool, was just then empty; Luke Fay, the young keeper, had gone to be married, so no information could be gained there.

It was twilight by this time. Some of the boldest of the party approached the gloomy thicket just in time to confront their mistress as she parted the dark boughs and stepped on to the open glade.

With the words, "Find the children and bring them

home," she passed through the group, taking her way towards the Hall. Her clothes, they said, clung close round her, heavy with wet; her head was uncovered, and her long black hair, uncurled and dripping, hung almost to her feet. They let her pass unquestioned, as if she had been a ghost, so startled were they by her sudden appearance at that place and by her mortal pallor.

They found the children — dead, drowned — carefully couched on heaps of boughs that had been torn from the bushes.

As they carried the little bodies home the great bell was tolled, as if to add the terrors of superstition to the horror of fact.

The Lady Maria had been seen by the nurse to enter the oratory where the old priest was praying. The nurse had called after her, to question her about the children; but she had passed in without any reply. The door was found to be fastened on the inside: neither the Lady Maria nor the priest gave any answer when called upon. Till Mr. Downside returned, no one dared force the door open. It was too late then, the room was empty. A few lines scrawled in pencil on the fly-leaf of a missal, by the Lady Maria's hand, were produced at the inquest held on the bodies of the children. They were addressed to her husband, telling him how she had lovingly drowned his children, holding them in her arms in the water, because she had been made to believe they were children of shame; and how she would now die herself, by a leap from the Bramble Bridge, doubting if she had not believed a lie.

By those mysterious steps she had taken the way to death unseen.

The mangled body of the priest was found upon the terrace. A narrow winding-stair ascends from a corner of the oratory to the campanile, and it was supposed that, maddened by horror at the confession made to him—perhaps, by remorse at his own part in the tragedy, for he was

suspected to have been the author of the fatal letter, which could never anywhere be found—he had rung his own requiem, and swung himself over the parapet of the bell tower.

Old Mr. Downside died that same night. As soon as it was possible, the widowed husband and childless father left the Hall and hastened abroad.

It was not wonderful that he should be in haste to do so. Yet that he did so, so hastily, made him the subject of scandal and suspicion.



CHAPTER III.

MR. DOWNSIDE'S SECOND WIFE.

WHEN, after the lapse of little more than a year, Mr. Downside brought a second and a foreign wife home to the Hall, it was natural that rumour should be busy, and old scandal raked up. Let rumour be as loud and scandal as busy as they might, nothing stirred the profound melancholy, the mournful peace, which now reigned in the old mansion.

Very little could be learnt about Mrs. Downside ; so, of course, there were “stories about her.” It was said that from the time when, leaning on her husband’s arm, and holding her little daughter by the hand, she had wearily mounted the steps from the court to the portico, on quitting the travelling-carriage in which she arrived, until the not very distant time when she was carried down those steps in her coffin to the hearse waiting in that same court—for that west entrance was used on such grand occasions as those of death and marriage—she had never smiled, nor spoken in a tone loud enough to be understood by those unaccustomed to her voice.

That Mr. Downside had married again so soon, that he had married a widow and a foreigner, were three distinct crimes in the eyes of the Bramblebridge dependents. The

seclusion in which the object of so much curiosity was kept was an additional source of discontent. Though she had crosses, and relics, and foreign holy books in her rooms, Mrs. Downside, it was believed, was no Roman Catholic, like the Lady Maria ; for she brought no priest with her, the altar was removed from the oratory, and the oratory itself only used as an ante-room to the chambers that opened from it, and to which, during the last two years of her life, the lady exclusively confined herself. Yet, spite of these proofs that she was no papist, she never entered the Bramblebridge church. From the first it was reported that her health was very delicate ; after she came to the Hall it grew more and more so. The days on which she would descend the stairs from the oratory, leaning on her husband's arm, to sit in the sun on the south terrace, became each successive summer fewer and farther between.

It was said that her husband lived only for her, seemed to have no single thought, wish, or interest, that did not affect her or her child : loved her with that profoundly passionate and most intimately tender love which can be given but once in a life-time, and is, whatever may have gone before, first love. Probably she loved him with even more intensity, for her nature must have been the deeper of the two. Yet they were both sad, always sad : sad summer and winter, sad when the sun shone and when the rain fell.

The few guests who sojourned at the Hall during Mrs. Downside's short life there, never lost the impression made by that visit. It seemed, they said, as if some strange oppression were in the air ; as if a weight fell upon heart and brain when the threshold was crossed : to laugh or to speak loud appeared impossible. Even the servants spoke low and trod softly ; and if they laughed, laughed by stealth. And the woman in whom seemed to centre all sadness, no one who had seen could forget her : they said she was so beautiful ! All who saw her said she was " so beautiful ! " and seemed to rest on that, not trying to describe her beauty. Her sadness, they

said, was not like the sadness of mere present suffering, and as little like the sadness of remorse. Indeed, it would have been difficult to associate the thought of sin with that saintly face ! If she never smiled, as little did she ever weep : her habitual expression was one of resignation to inevitable and unutterable woe ; such woe as an angelic nature might feel through the knowledge of having been the instrument of irremediable suffering and wrong. A celebrated artist, commissioned by Mr. Downside to paint his wife's picture shortly before her death, said that for years afterwards, go where he would, do what he might, he was haunted by the gaze of the eyes he had so vainly attempted to represent on his canvas.

A child, even such a child as Esterel—that was the name of Mrs. Downside's little daughter—a child whose eyes, too like her mother's, seemed over-charged with meaning, and burning with unchild-like fire ; a child whom the English servants regarded as a sort of elf or sprite—beautiful as an angel, but strange and incomprehensible as if bewitched ; a child they feared rather than loved, though she was seldom naughty, and gave little trouble—even such a weird, change-ling sort of child as this, seemed an incongruous element in such a life as that led by Mr. and Mrs. Downside.

They both loved Esterel with passionate fondness, and she had passion for them both : a passionate worship for her sad-eyed mother, at whose feet she would sit idle, into whose face she would look for hours : a passionate gloom of jealous distrust for her step-father.

Mrs. Downside's life was only prolonged five years after she was brought to the Hall. Esterel, still a mere child in age, was left indeed forlorn. No one saw her shed a tear ; no one heard one cry, nor one complaint. Like a sprite, she slipped through the hands of all who wished to detain her, meaning to try to console her. Clasp- ing to her breast something that had been her mother's—some glove, riband, or even a faded flower, she wandered to and fro, dark or light, never resting ; in her mother's rooms, when her step-father

was not there; when he was, she avoided them and roamed about the corridor and passages—anywhere to be alone.

For the first few days Mr. Downside had no thought even for her child, no one dared speak to him even about the child. The servants whispered to each other that she would not live—a little ghostly thing with such great burning eyes; she could not live, they said, or, if she lived, she would certainly go mad. At last these whispers penetrated to the inward ear of the mourner; at last, he asked for the child. She was sought in vain for some time. When at length they found her, she was lying senseless on the floor beneath her mother's picture, her little form hidden by a high-backed chair, at which she had been kneeling.

Mr. Downside picked her up; and as the tiny head, with its wealth of golden hair, fell over his arm, and he held the wasted form upon his breast, he bitterly reproached himself for the selfish luxury of sorrow that had let this be. Tenderly as a mother he nursed the little Esterel through the illness that followed. During this illness, some words spoken by the doctor—the doctor who had attended her mother, and who was in Mr. Downside's confidence—spoken when he believed she was asleep, sank deep into the child's inmost consciousness, often to be recalled when she could better comprehend their import.

When Esterel was well again, she found that admittance to those sacred rooms which had been her mother's was denied her. Leaving everything as it had been left at his wife's death, Mr. Downside had locked the oratory door and always kept the key about him.

Years passed. If Miss Esterel had been his own daughter, Mr. Downside could not have loved her more, was a saying often on the lips of the servants. She was called by his name, she was known as his heiress: his passionate love for her mother, his passionate tenderness for his drowned children, seemed to unite in the feeling with which he regarded his step-daughter. And she did not love him! The strange child grew into a strange girl, the girl into a woman, and he could

not win her love. She treated him with a soft, cold gravity : she was always gentle, but never loving. It was not that she had not love to bestow : he had seen passionate love, suppressed silent passion, lavished, at different epochs of her life, on her doll, her dog, her horse, her books, her music, and on one gentle young governess, who gained more influence over her than any one else had ever had, and who loved her tenderly.

Unfortunately, Gertrude Havering fell ill and died, after having lived about eighteen months at the Hall. This early death of one so sweet and good—for whom her love was in its first glow—made a profound and injurious impression upon Esterel, confirming the melancholy inherited from her mother and cherished by all surrounding influences, which her gentle instructress had sought to remove and to replace by a steadfast faith and cheerful piety.

Rosa Hilhouse, whom Mr. Downside then chose for Esterel's companion, chiefly on account of her gaiety and good-humour, was frivolous, and, to a great extent, worthless. Esterel did not like her nor respect her ; and yet she, too, gained some influence over her. When a brilliant marriage removed Miss Hilhouse, changing her into Lady Winstay, of Southsand Castle, Esterel expressed a wish that she should have no successor : she was too old and too studiously inclined to need a governess, and she desired no companion.

After a while, a new passion occupied Esterel : the gamekeeper's pretty daughter, Marian Fay, had been her plaything as a child ; she made her a friend and a pupil now. Finding a fresh and new pleasure in playing the part of instructress to a willing and intelligent mind, she abandoned herself to this pleasure.

Mingling curiously with Esterel's habitual and in-born melancholy of temperament, there was that capacity for intense enjoyment—for enjoying in a complete way, with every fibre of her being, with no reserves—to which, perhaps, a southern

insouciance is indispensable. Though Esterel was a woman now, she lived in as complete a dream as she had done when she was a child : she had as little faith of one kind and as much of another as a child : she had that power of living only in the present which a child has. She was as little speculative about those things concerning which speculation is legitimate, and as wildly visionary concerning those things about which sight and knowledge are alike impossible, as a child. With the frailest physical organization, she had as yet known little illness. Frail as the body looked, it was for the mind that any one who knew her well would tremble at any crisis of her life—more especially had they known what none knew till long after, that those words uttered by the doctor at the bedside of the sick child, often rang a knell—a knell of something worse than death—through the brain of the girl and the woman.



CHAPTER IV

MISTRESS AND PUPIL.

ESTEREL's favourite morning room was at the western end of the south front ; her favourite lounge on the crimson cushions in the window which overhung the south terrace. In this window were always heaped the books which just then chiefly occupied and interested her.

On one of the first days when the spring sun had any warmth-giving power, Esterel was lying in this window, idle ; she could just lie in the sunshine in this way, and be as little troubled by a sense of time, by pangs of conscience at wasting it, as is a cat or a dog. She was dreaming with wide-open eyes. Mr. Downside came into the room and up to the window, but she did not stir : he stood looking down upon her : his eyes had inexpressible longing and tenderness in them, as he laid his hand caressingly on her hair, only for a

moment—he had a shrinking consciousness that the fondling touch was not welcome.

“Your enemy, old Winter, has taken flight now, my child,” he said, presently. “You must get out in the sunshine, Esterel; the wind is southerly to-day. I want you to ride with me to Southsand Castle: will you? Lady Winstay begged me to bring you, and to say that if the ride tires you, you must stay and sleep, or she will drive you back. Will you come?”

“Not to-day. Marian is coming this morning.” The answer was given with the head still averted, the eyes looking out over the bare forest.

“Marian can come any day: you have only to send her a message.”

“I had rather not disappoint Marian.”

“The ride will do you good, and I should like to have you for my companion.”

“I am not strong enough to ride so far. I don’t care to see Rosa. I cannot disappoint Marian.” This answer was given in a slow, soft, languid way; and yet a way that made one feel further discussion of the matter to be peculiarly hopeless. Mr. Downside looked pained. After a pause of some length, he said,—

“You mean most kindly and generously by that young girl; but I do not think you are acting wisely, or in a way that will conduce to your real happiness in the end, or to hers.”

Esterel turned and looked up into his face.

“I do not think I do mean kindly or generously; I do not think I mean anything. I love Marian, and she loves me; I like to teach, and she likes to learn, and we like to be together.”

“That is all very well if there were no future for either of you. But as you love this young girl—it is a curious and cruel perversity that causes you to turn for an object for your love anywhere rather than to me.” (He spoke this with hurried bitterness, so low and rapidly that she hardly caught the sense of what he said—bitterness directed against the fact, not against Esterel.) “As you love this young girl, you will

not, I am sure, wish to interfere with her prospects of happiness. In educating her as you are doing, both by your personal influence and instructions and by the books with which you keep her supplied, you are, I fear, unfitting her to be happy in any station to which it is probable that she will be called."

"You cannot tell, I cannot tell, nobody can tell to what station my pretty Marian may be called."

"The highest promotion she can look for, Esterel, my dear, is to become the wife of my young bailiff—Jacob Stubbs."

"Marian to be Mrs. Jacob Stubbs! No, no!" Putting back her hair from her face with a little hand easily lost sight of in those abundant tresses, Esterel shook her head and smiled with the tolerance of better knowledge.

"Jacob is a good young fellow, a superior young man, and old Stubbs told me he believed he was 'after' Marian Fay. He is good-hearted, gentle-tempered, brave and thoroughly reliable; most valuable qualities these, my dear, and he might make your little friend very happy:—happiness is a rare thing, a dear and precious thing, the mere chance of which is not lightly to be thrown away."

"It is not kind of you to spoil my pleasure in Marian," Esterel said, wilfully.

A curious expression crossed Mr. Downside's face—a curious expression to see on the mild, melancholy face of a man who, bent and careworn, looked far past middle life: it was one of mingled love and cruelty. He said in a suppressed voice, "If the young girl *only* could suffer, you should crush her life out for your pleasure as you might crush a rose against your mouth for its fragrant coolness, and I would say nothing! What I wished was to save you the pain of her pain. I know by experience that our bitterest sufferings come to us through the wrongs and sufferings of others. It was you whom I wished to spare, not Marian."

He turned from Esterel's half-startled look and left the

room. Esterel watched him to the door, with something of wistful wonder in her eyes. When he closed it, she looked out of the window again, heaving a great sigh as she thought—"How he loves me!"

Why could she not love him? The passionate, jealous distrust of the child must have been subdued long ago: yet she did not love him! She had grown up in the belief—a secret belief that she never whispered to any one—that her step-father had done her mother some great wrong. Wild words of her melancholy mother's had sunk into the mind and fed the morbid imagination of the silent child. Esterel now turned over all the sayings afresh; old Spanish proverbs some of them were, meaning such things as, "Those whom we love can alone stab us to the quick;" "If he whom we love wrong us, we only love him the more." She longed afresh to know the truth; but Esterel could not probe nor question: these things were of the past, the sacred silence of the grave over them; it would have seemed like sacrilege to her to break this silence: she had, indeed, a "grand talent for silence."

A gentle knock at the door roused Esterel. At her "Come in, Marian," it opened to admit "pretty Marian Fay," as the little maiden was called in the neighbourhood. Esterel rose to meet and welcome Marian; then books, dictionaries, and grammars were strewn upon the table, and study began in earnest.

Marian was younger than her mistress some three or four years, and she would always look younger than her years. People say, "Time deals gently" with this person or that, but is it not rather the case that some natures deal gently with time? Those in whom the trials of life only deepen trust, and to whom the sorrows of life only make heaven seem nearer and dearer, lift smooth and unfurrowed brows to the sunshine, sometimes even unto the end. Marian had the expression of a sweet and fearless child, though she was a woman in years. Hers was one of those faces which you seek

to describe by likening it to some flower. This morning the colour on her cheek, heightened by her walk in the fresh soft wind, was bright and delicate as the pink of a wild rose, and the small, sensitive mouth, which was, perhaps, the prettiest feature in the pretty face, was almost as bright as a rose-berry: ordinarily Marian was pale. Her brown hair, which she wore in a simple fashion taught her by Esterel, drawn off the blue-veined temples, and showing all the width of the smooth white brow, had shades in it, not gold, nor yellow, but resembling that colour which in a primrose seems both light and colour at once, and like nothing but itself. Indeed, Marian more resembled a primrose than any other flower,—she had the quaint, complete and dainty loveliness, fresh, cool, and dewy, of an ungathered wood-primrose: being so lovely, it is a wonder she was counted pretty. The small face seemed made to be taken between the hands and kissed, and her eyes—but none could understand the beauty of Marian's eyes, upon whom they had not shone full of love: their lashes had a trick of drooping; but when they were uplifted, there was a wonderful charm, a holy charm, in the direct, unabashed, innocent way in which the eyes met your gaze.

Esterel was a little taller than Marian, and much slighter. Both exquisitely fair, they were yet most unlike, with a subtlety of unlikeness. Esterel's should have been a noble face, as Marian's was lovely; but it looked as if an unreal and purposeless life, together with extreme frailness of physical organization, were frittering away its soul and substance to a fragility that would make its chief charm to consist in that exquisite pathos of evanescence which may suffice as the charm of a flower, or of a summer insect, but not as the charm of a human being, when the evanescence suggested seems that of soul and sense together.

While every movement of mind or body would send rose-hues to Marian's cheeks, no shade of red even tinged the whiteness of Esterel's: in this whiteness there was something peculiar; it was not the mere whiteness of a white skin, it gave

no idea of coolness, nor was the tint unvarying. Sometimes, indeed, the face was dim—the white opaque; but oftener it glowed as if lighted up by white flame from within, as if clear white fire, instead of blood, ran in the veins. Esterel's eyes were, in some things, like her mother's; they had never the calm, saint-like light that had often shone from the mother's, but they seemed to have caught the expression of incommunicable sadness which might be natural to the woman with a life-history behind her, hardly to the girl whose life, though she was not now much younger than her mother had been at her death, was all to come. But Esterel's eyes did not always wear that look: they could be at once a night of darkness and the glowing meteors illumining that night. When she was ill, or in any way overwrought or excited, those eyes would seem to grow larger and larger, and to glow with a more and more intense heat, till you would say that they were fearful, far rather than that they were beautiful, and would be thankful when the black lashes rested on the white cheek. Her hair, of a bright gold tint, with a natural ripple in it, that, catching the light, made it seem all the brighter, and of such superabundant luxuriance, that it clothed her "all in a mantle as of beaten gold," when it was free, contrasted strangely with the eyes and lashes.

In manner Esterel was always dreamy—her speech always slow and very soft; yet there was a feeling among all who knew her that she must not be opposed, nor her will resisted. As to character, she knew herself as little as anybody knew her; as far as beliefs and principles were concerned, her mind was a blank page. She had an enthusiasm for what she thought grand, noble, and beautiful, and was fretted, without knowing why, by the smallness and narrowness of some of the people among whom she moved; but she shrank back to her books again, without any questioning as to what it was annoyed her, or how she was, and would wish to be, different from those around her. From the crucible of fiery trial, "saved as by fire," something of her nature might come forth as refined

gold; or she might be scorched and consumed by unholy passion; or, again, in pale flame, her life might early burn out before she had been roused from the dream of it.

Neither mistress nor pupil was as diligent as usual on this particular morning. Esterel's eyes often turned to the window—it was so beautiful, looking over the softening woods to the sea! Marian had not her wonted delight in her lessons; for since the last time that she came, things had been said at home that had taken the bloom off her pleasure, and made her conscience uneasy.

When the usual course of study was finished, a sudden thought struck Esterel.

“Marian, you learn languages with little trouble: I should love to teach you Spanish. Will you learn it?” she asked.

Marian looked down, instead of looking up, and coloured painfully.

“What is it, dear child?” her mistress asked wonderingly,—the proposal of any new study had generally been received with a flash of pleasure.

“I should like it so very much, dear Miss Esterel, but——”

“But?”

“If you please, ma'am——”

“Marian! Marian! Is that the way you speak to me? That is how the children in the charity school answer me. Will you not drop me a curtsey, too?”

“It would only be my duty, dear Miss Esterel.” Marian gathered courage, and at last looked up with a smile. She soon grew grave again as she went on: “My father and mother, particularly father—*my* father,” she corrected herself quickly, “think I am learning too many things, and that you are trying to make me too much of a lady, dear Miss Esterel: they think that it is very kind of you to be fond of me and to teach me; but they say that after being so much with you I shall not be happy among the sort of people I shall always have to live with.”

"Twice in one morning!" thought Esterel, impatiently.

"You know, Marian, that I would not have you displease your parents to please me. Come to me no more, if you do not wish it!" she said.

"Oh, Miss Esterel!" Tears gathered in Marian's eyes, and splashed down upon the book in her lap.

"You do wish to come? You would be sorry not to come?"

"Very, very, very sorry."

"Why?"

"I love you dearly, Miss Esterel, and I love to learn the things you teach me." Marian caressed, with her cheek and her lips, the hand Esterel had laid on her shoulder. Esterel kissed the sweet young face—kissed it passionately on the eyes and mouth; then she said,—

"You ought to love me, dear, for I love you very much. But what have you to say about all this, Marian?"

"I hardly know what to say. I think—I hope, I can do my duty as well, and love all my friends as well as if you had not taught me anything. I mean I ought to be able to do my duty as well; but it was quite my fault that my father was angry yesterday."

"Tell me all about it, Marian."

"My mother went to Deerhurst yesterday, and was away all day. My father walked half way to meet her in the evening; they met young Mr. Stubbs in the wood as they came home, and brought him in to supper. I had been reading all the evening in the 'Shakspeare' you gave me on my birthday; till I heard their voices as they came up the path. I did not know how late it was. The fire was nearly out and no supper ready; father and mother were tired, and cold, and hungry: and indeed it was very neglectful of me, and enough to make them angry." Penitent tears came to Marian's eyes as she spoke.

"And you were scolded before young Mr. Stubbs?" Esterel asked, indignantly.

"Not much; mother hushed father up, saying it was the first time, and she believed it would be the last. I could not help crying a little, I was so sorry; but young Mr. Stubbs was very kind: he did not seem to take any notice, but he fetched in some logs, and soon made the fire burn up, and did all he could to help me. It was this morning that my father and mother said so much."

Esterel had watched the changing cheek of her protégé gravely.

"Marian, Mr. Jacob Stubbs is not going to be the Ferdinand of my dainty little Miranda?" she asked. Marian blushed scarlet: something in the scornful tone in which the name was pronounced jarred upon her sense of what was due to an excellent young man; and yet she did not wish to speak in his praise.

"I must remember that I am only a cottage girl," she said, with a smile. "It is a very ugly name; but he is so good, and kind—he cannot help having an ugly name, you know, Miss Esterel—that it would be wrong of me to laugh at it."

"Do you mean that you like this young man? Have you given him any reason to think that you like him?"

Honest Marian paused and thought before she answered. "I like him, Miss Esterel; he knows I like him. We used to like each other before he went away, when we were children," she answered, frankly; "but if you mean ——" and now the downcast face flushed, "Love, oh, no! I have not given him any reason to think that I love him."

"I shall not lose you yet, then! Some day my love will be nothing to you, compared with other love. It is not Mr. Stubbs, however, will be my rival. Going so soon, Marian? When will you come again?"

"When may I come? What shall I do about it? What do you think I ought to do, dear Miss Esterel?"

Esterel had very little idea of what "ought" meant.

"I will come and talk to your mother, Marian, and

set it all right. You can come to-morrow morning, as usual."

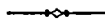
"Not to-morrow, dear Miss Esterel. I must do my ironing in the morning, and help my mother with her work."

"Happy little Marian!"

Again Marian's loving lips were pressed to her mistress's hand, and Marian's eyes had wistful pity in them as they looked up into Esterel's.

"How I wish I could help you in any way, dearest Miss Esterel!" she said. "So much you do for me, and I can do nothing for you."

"The time may come!" answered Esterel, dreamily, as if reading the future. "Meanwhile, you do all I want you to do in loving me. The time may come, Marian."



CHAPTER V

MARIAN'S HOME.

"You went to your room early last night, my child," Mr. Downside said, when he met his step-daughter at the breakfast-table.

"Was it early? I thought you were late."

"Later than I had intended; it was difficult to get away. I think you might have been interested in some of the people who are staying at the castle. Lady Winstay says that if you will not go to Southsand, they shall all come over here and take us by storm. I almost think she means it, and that we must invite the whole party. Does it make any difference to you when they come?"

Mr. Downside tried to speak lightly, as if it were an ordinary thing to have visitors at the Hall; but his tone and his look were extremely nervous. Esterel fixed her eyes upon him inquiringly, and then said,—

"Rosa has been talking to you about me."

"Lady Winstay is anxious about you, as I am. She says our life here is dull and depressing, and must have an injurious effect upon any young person. No doubt she is right," Mr. Downside added with a sigh, something like a groan. "I am not fit to be the only companion of any young girl. We must change our mode of life, Esterel, my dear."

"Not for me. I am happy enough."

"Your tone contradicts your words."

"Indeed I want nothing, unless ——"

"Unless?"

"It were to die." This was said with a matter-of-fact simplicity, with nothing dramatic or melo-dramatic in the tone: nor did the hearer seem startled or surprised. He sighed again as he answered,—

"A natural longing for me, but not for one young and beautiful as you are, Esterel. You want rousing to the realities of life."

"How often I have heard that," Esterel said, wearily. "What are the realities of life?"

"Please God they will be for you love and happiness; for me they have been sorrow and suffering worse than death."

A long silence followed. It was broken by Mr. Downside's inquiring if Esterel would go out that day? If he should drive her?

Remembering her promise to Marian, she said,—

"I shall walk a little, as far as the gamekeeper's cottage. To-morrow, in the afternoon, I will do anything you please."

Esterel's morning walk was not taken till towards noon, and then very slowly and with many pauses: it was long since she had been out-doors. The air was soft, the sunshine bright, and a keen delight animated her languid frame.

A narrow wood-path, which you could enter from the shrubberies bounding the south garden, was Esterel's favourite way to the cottage, because it was sheltered from the west wind

that often swept up the broad road too keen and strong. This path was not direct ; it wound past the ill-omened Pool to the back of the cottage, where, on a spot that had been cleared from all other trees, and from all underwood, grew five gigantic pines. There were only two small casements on this side of the cottage, the windows of Marian's bed-room, and set so low in the house-wall, that they offered an easy way of entrance or exit to any one slight enough to pass through. This fact had never troubled the innocent Marian ; her only fears, and these she believed herself to have long outgrown, having been of visitants from the supernatural world : so many frightful stories she had heard about that Pool, the black bushes surrounding which she could see from the window—stories, the latest of which, about the poor mad lady drowning her children there, was known to be true, so why should not the others be ? Marian had never believed that any apparition would be permitted to do her harm ; but she might die of fright, she thought. Many a night, when she was younger, had the noises in the pine-trees—in which the wind would always shriek, or howl, or moan, or sob—and the sight of her white window-curtain with the moonlight on it, stirred by some draft of air kept Marian awake in wide-eyed awe.

Esterel stood still under the pines before she went round to the cottage door. She had been close to the Pool, pushing her way to it through the tangled wilderness of bushes ; she had stood on its brink and looked down at her own white face, mirrored in the dark water, till it seemed to her like a face, familiar and yet strange, looking up at her from the depth. Now, as she stood and listened to the sounds in the trees, thinking of the latest tragedy of the Pool, her mind seemed to be seeking and searching for a secret link—a secret link which she believed connected her mother's history with that of her unhappy predecessor ; and the pines seemed to be chanting lowly and slowly, " A mystery ! A mystery ! A fateful, fearful mystery." Shudder after shudder shook Esterel's slight form before she could rouse herself from the sort of trance that came

over her. At last, she passed from under the trees, and walked quickly round to the cheerful front of the cottage. Esterel's quick walk was peculiar, and did not seem to belong to her languid look and manner: it was the free, elastic gait of a mountaineer: the small feet were so firmly placed, and the slight frame so perfectly balanced, that, on level ground, she seemed to glide rather than walk. Marian knew her footstep, always, from any other.

Marian's work was done, and she was on the watch, half-hoping to see her mistress. She met Esterel at the garden gate, a rustic gate of pine branches, and led the way up the flagged path, bordered by snowdrops and crocuses, to the porch, over which the honeysuckle was not yet green, and from that to her own little parlour.

"Such a pleasant little room this is, Marian!" Esterel said, as she sank into the chair Marian had set for her. "Everything in it looks pure and fresh; from these snowdrops on the table, to you, my own snowdrop."

"Last spring you called me your primrose, Miss Esterel!" said Marian, smiling. "I do love this room; but if all your pretty presents were taken away it would look very bare! I should lose all my books—except my Bible and Bunyan. I should lose my desk, my workbox, and all the ornaments that make my mother, in fun, sometimes, call this the drawing-room."

"Where is your mother, dear?"

"She is gone up to put on her afternoon-gown, ready to see you, if you should come. I will run and tell her you are here. But couldn't I get you anything, dear Miss Esterel? You look so tired, I am afraid it was too long a walk for you."

"I liked it, Marian: I like to rest here. I should like a glass of milk."

While Marian was out of the room, Mrs. Fay came down. Marian's mother was a delicate-looking little woman; very pretty still, but with a good many lines of care and sorrow in her face. She had lost many children; Marian, the eldest,

was the only one living. For Esterel, Mrs. Fay had a motherly feeling of compassionate love for a motherless girl; she had, too, a reverent recollection of Esterel's mother: once, when Marian was a baby, Luke Fay had got into some sort of trouble which was nearly losing him his place, and his wife had taken her child and gone up to the Hall to plead for him. She had seen Mr. Downside in his wife's presence, and the rich man's wife had looked upon the poor man's wife with loving pity, and had taken the baby Marian in her arms and kissed her; all the weeping woman asked had been granted, and granted in such a way as had more than doubled her gratitude.

In answer to a question of Esterel's, Mrs. Fay said,—

“It isn't I would object to my maid's learning anything you are pleased to teach her, Miss Esterel. I often tell her father there's not a woman anywhere about has the comfort in her girl that I have in Marian; and if she is a pleasure and comfort to you, as you are good enough to say she is, I'm glad and proud. I do not deny that now and again I am a bit frightened at her knowing so many things, and at your treating her like a sister, because I can't help looking to the future.”

“Why to the future?” asked Esterel.

“When you are gone, I mean, she will miss you so sorely.”

“Gone!—dead, you mean?”

“God forbid I should mean that, Miss Esterell. I was thinking you would marry and go away some day.”

“I do not expect to leave the Hall except for the churchyard, Mrs. Fay. My mother” (she lowered her voice as she said this) “was but little older than I am now, when she died.”

“Ah! but she must have had trouble and grief to wear her.”

“I do not wish to live long; there are much worse things than early death. To return to what we were talking of; it is

your husband, then, who dislikes Marian's learning what I teach her, and her being with me?"

"I don't say that he does wholly dislike it, ma'am: Luke is a clever man and fond of his book. I do believe that in his heart he is mighty proud of Marian, as well as fond of her."

"Then, what did it mean—the lecture given to Marian the other day? She was much troubled."

"She is so tender-hearted, that a word to her is as bad as a blow to another. Father said more than he meant, and my girl thought he meant more than he said: men are curious like, and it's hard to say what comes over them sometimes. It was the fire being low and the supper not being ready; happening so contrary just that night when young Jacob Stubbs came home with us."

"Then you do not mean to keep my pet and pupil from me," Esterel said, taking the glass of milk that Marian just then brought her, "and she is not to come with a troubled face. I suppose your father is not home yet, dear?"

"He will be directly, Miss Esterel; it is just his dinner-time."

Esterel sat resting and talking till Luke was in sight, then she went out just in time to meet him at the gate; she stopped there a few minutes to talk to him about Marian.

What she said, and the way she said it, quite overcame poor Luke. He was a man of stern sense and independence, and when he saw the young lady coming from his door, he made up his mind to have a bit of an argument with her, if she gave him the chance, about the wisdom of her conduct with regard to Marian. He pulled off his cap, and stood ready and undismayed, one hand leaning on the gate, which he kept open for her to pass out when she pleased. Esterel came up to him; she held her little hand out to "Marian's father." To take it he had to drop his cap, and when he had taken it he was afraid of crushing it, and of soiling her delicate glove: this, to begin with, made him forget the greater part of what he

had meant to say. Then the look of Esterel's eyes reminded him of something his wife had told him about the eyes of the beautiful sick lady who had won him pardon for a grave offence ; while the fragile effect of the whole figure that confronted him made him feel (without knowing what he felt) that to argue with Esterel about the future results of her treatment of Marian would be something like arguing with a frail flower that must die to-morrow about the folly of enjoying the sunshine to-day.

"Poor young lady !" he said to his wife, when they talked the matter over together. "It won't be for long ; let her have what pleasure she can in our Marian."

Mrs. Fry wisely refrained from remarking that it was not she who had been seeing folly and harm in the intercourse between the maiden at the cottage and the lady of the Hall : pursuing her own thoughts, she said,—

"I married above me when I married you, Luke, and I've been very happy (but for the sorrow about our children). Why should not our Marian marry above us ? She'd never be the one to keep her head high if she did."

"I'll be well contented to see her marry young Stubbs, wife," Luke answered, sturdily.

"If that is to be, it will be: he is a good young fellow, and kind ; but don't worry our girl, Luke," pleaded the mother.

CHAPTER VI.

THE KEY.

RETURNING from Southsand Castle one day, not long after his last visit there, Mr. Downside told Esterel he had promised Lady Winstay that he would give a ball on his step-daughter's birthday. "You shall have no trouble, Lady Winstay will manage everything," he said.

Esterel would not have been much more shocked had Mr. Downside announced his intention to pull down the Hall.

"We must expect some curious guests at our ball," she said, half to herself, after a long silence.

"Curious guests! What do you mean, my dear?"

"I was only thinking of the ghosts," she answered, quietly. There was a yet longer silence.

Mr. Downside was very uneasy: he had felt quite sure that he could not be paining Esterel more than he pained himself, and that the step he had pledged himself to was for her good; but now, watching her face, he repented that he had pledged himself. Lady Winstay, like a cautious woman, had not been content with anything short of a definite promise before witnesses. To obtain this, she had only had to harp upon a string upon which his own fears played constantly: telling him that he was killing Esterel by letting her "stagnate at the Hall" as he did; assuring him that if Esterel were not roused from her dream-life, she would certainly just dream herself to death. "Society" was Lady Winstay's panacea: to break the charmed quiet of the Hall at one blow was easier than to proceed by slow and cautious steps. Esterel's one-and-twentieth birthday, which would be in a few weeks, would form a good excuse for the striking of this blow, and the birthday ball of an heiress would naturally be celebrated in a brilliant manner. Lady Winstay planned it all; the throwing open of the west front, the illumination of the court, the band and the supper from London: she revelled in the thought of all this; she was ready to throw her arms round Mr. Downside's neck when he said in his melancholy way, "You must manage it all, Lady Winstay. You understand these things: you must be so kind as to manage it all."

"You are pained at the thought of this?" Mr. Downside now asked Esterel; wishing the silence to be broken, even by some expression of her displeasure.

"More than I can say," was her low-spoken reply.

“And why?”

“I do not feel as if the Hall can ever be the same afterwards: it will be desecrated.”

“The noise and bustle will be almost exclusively confined to the west rooms: you have no associations with them. The rooms we both hold sacred will be kept sacred.”

Esterel's eyes flashed as she said, passionately, “I would not bear it otherwise.”

“Esterel!” he began, after a pause that seemed one of inward struggle, “do you think that your love for her, so seldom named between us, but of whom we both think so constantly—you having been but a child when she died—do you think that your love can compare with mine? If it were not that I feel I have never lost her, that I still breathe her presence with every breath I draw, I could not bear to live!” He spoke with unmistakable fervour. Esterel kept her eyes fixed upon his face, but his were averted even before he had finished speaking. He stood in one of the windows looking out, gently swaying his slight, bent form to and fro. Esterel's eyes softened as she watched him: she went up to him presently and touched his sleeve. His lips were moving, but no sound escaping from them: he seemed to have forgotten her presence.

“Can you forgive me if my thoughts of her wrong you?” she whispered.

“My sweet child, yes.” He turned upon her with a somewhat startled expression, but his eyes were full of love. “You cannot judge me justly,” he added. “I am thankful that you do not hate me. If you knew more you might; but not if you knew all, as God does: as she does.”

“Why may I not know all?” she asked, shaking as she spoke, so much that it seemed as if the words were shaken from her.

“It cannot be.” He raised his head and spoke and stood firmly. A moment after he covered his face with his hands, and rocked himself to and fro, repeating, “I dare not let it

be," in an agonized voice, as if some temptation were strong upon him : as if some influence whispered, " Let it be."

" I did not mean to pain you : I often pain you. You are good to me. I am sorry," Esterel said, penitently.

Mr. Downside withdrew his shaking hands from his face ; his manner was still greatly agitated as he answered,—

" By one small omission you pain me more keenly, more exquisitely, than any one else in all the world has power to pain my body, or my soul."

" Tell me how I do this ? "

" Other step-daughters call their step-fathers as if they were their own fathers ; but you—this is the one thing you would not do at *her* bidding. Yet you can never have known any other father : you have no remembrance of any other ? "

Esterel put her hand to her forehead, and seemed to search her memory.

" Did my mother bid me call you father ? " she asked.

" She did."

" I cannot : I do not know why ; but I cannot. Do not ask it ! "

" Esterel ! It is right that I should ask it : right that you should grant it." So far he spoke firmly, and with something of command ; then he added nervously, to do so will help you to feel as you should feel. Do not I feel towards you as a father should ? Why should you not feel as a daughter towards me ? You should—you ought."

Her face was whiter than its white wont, and she was quivering as an aspen quivers.

" I *ought* to feel towards you as I should feel towards my own father ? " she asked.

The wavering form was firm again for a moment, as he answered,—

" You *ought*."

Esterel shudderingly drew in her breath : her eyes rather than her voice asked,—

" Why ? "

They looked into each other's eyes. Mr. Downside flinched, and turned away.

"You can ask why!" he said, with an almost childish peevishness. "Have I not played the father's part well? Could I have done more for you, or done it more ungrudgingly, had I been your father? Have I ever denied you anything?"

Esterel turned from him; she was very sick at heart, and hardly dared think wherefore.

They were in the many-windowed south drawing-room. Esterel withdrew to one of the east windows at its far end, and there she sat watching how the twilight was darkening over the bleak wold, settling down so greyly, softening the bleakness, covering the bareness, as, for some, the approach of death softens the bleakness and covers the bareness of life.

Mr. Downside had been pacing the room since he spoke; by-and-by he followed her to her retreat.

"You will be cold in that window, my love; come to the couch by the fire."

"Yes, there is one thing you have denied me," she said, letting him lead her from the window, yet not heeding his just spoken words, but answering what he had asked perhaps a quarter of an hour ago. "Will you still deny it me, father?"

He caught her in his arms, and pressed her to him.

"I can deny you nothing. What have I ever denied you—you the child of my faithful angel?" She submitted to his caresses, but did not return them: when she could free herself, she said,—

"I have not asked this since I was a child. You refused me then. I want the key—the key of the oratory, that I may go into my mother's rooms, may look at her picture when I please."

He paused, and his face clouded over.

"I do not think you have any right to deny me this," she

urged. "Give it me now, at once: is it not natural I should wish it?"

"Quite natural; it shall be as you ask: and yet I wish you had not asked this. I lend you my key, I cannot give it you; but return it to me to-morrow, and I will have one made for you to keep."

It was a small key. The oratory door was a panel in the staircase; the lock and the hinges were concealed, and the key-hole was hidden by a carved ornament, which could be slipped aside. He took the key off a chain he always wore inside his coat, and gave it her; she slipped it into her bosom, and touched his hand with her lips—a mark of gratitude which seemed to touch him greatly, for as he bent forward to return that salutation in like manner, she saw that tears glistened in his eyes.

They sat together in the firelight, while darkness gathered out-doors, and the great room grew more and more shadowy. For the first time, Esterel heard her father talk of her mother; she listened eagerly, drinking in every word, but not daring to utter one of the questions that rose in her heart. Of the facts of her mother's history she learnt nothing from anything he said. Some of his expressions seemed to hint at a mystery of great sorrow without throwing the least ray of light on that mystery.

The opening of the door, and an announcement that dinner was served, called them both back to the present. Mr. Downside looked less melancholy than his wont, as, with his daughter on his arm, he, according to the fashion of the Hall, followed the butler, who, lamp in hand, led the way down the long passage to the dining-room. It seemed to him that Esterel's little hand rested on his arm to-night with something of confidence and of fondness.

Though this south dining-room, known in older times as the winter-parlour, was a mere closet when compared with the west banqueting chamber, yet it was drearily large for two persons. The carved oak panelling of its walls appeared to

give out darkness, rather than merely to absorb the light. The table, guarded by screens from the drafts of doors and windows, seemed as a small oasis of brightness reclaimed from the general gloom.

Now, as always—even from the time when as a little child, seated in her own peculiar chair, she had shared her father's solitude in the desolate early days of his widowhood, her orphanhood, and had perused the dimness with vague hope and fear of what it might hold and hide—now, even as then, Esterel's eyes would swim in the sea of gloom lying round, rather than rest on the island of light.

As it was with her physical sight in that room, so it was with her soul's sight in her life; that seemed to her to be swimming always in a sea of mystery and darkness, searching what it could not find, grappling with what it could not grasp, desiring rest and finding none.



CHAPTER VII.

A VIGIL.

THAT night it seemed long to Esterel before the house was quiet; or rather before those noises in the inhabited portion of it, to which she sat listening after her maid had left her, and which indicated that some one was still stirring, ceased. Esterel knew the Hall better than to wait for absolute quiet; no one had ever watched through the night in any room of the building without hearing noises for which it was not easy to account; some of them noises common to other old, large, and only half-inhabited mansions; some of them, report said, peculiar to the Hall.

At last, Esterel softly opened her door, and, a lamp in one hand, the key in the other, passed along the gallery into which her own room opened, to the oratory door. Do you know

how, at such a time, shadows from the darkness beneath run up the staircase towards you, threatening the light you carry ? And how mysterious draughts fly past you, making that light flicker and almost fail ? And how the silence *sounds* round you, resenting even your stealthy tread, and the motion of the air produced by your soft flowing garments ?

As Esterel passed along, it seemed as if her white face and golden hair, rather than the lamp she carried, chased the darkness from before her.

But when she paused at the oratory door, setting down her lamp, while she felt for the lock and used the key, the darkness made a great rush up the gaping staircase, approached, almost touched her. As if she felt it, she turned when she had opened the door, took the lamp in her hand again, and gave a long look down into the blackness ; cowed, it retreated, to rush back and up to the door when she had passed in, closing and locking it behind her.

In the oratory the unstirred dust of years lay thick, except where frequent footsteps kept a pathway through it. These footsteps Esterel soon blurred with her sweeping drapery. Setting her lamp on the oaken table that stood where, in the days of the Lady Maria and her confessor, the altar had stood, Esterel paused before she went further, surrendering herself to recollections of that past which now seemed so near. Presently she went to one end of the great oriel window. No ! she had not forgotten the trick of it, nor had the spring rusted for want of use ; it yielded to her pressure, and the door-casement opened without noise. Esterel stepped out, on to the first step of the stone staircase : the night was not dark, the moon, struggling through thin clouds, shone out fitfully. Standing there, the unheeded wind waving her loose garments and her long hair, she recalled how sometimes on still, summer days, when, as a child, she played on the terrace below, she had looked up to see her beautiful mother, standing where she stood now, looking down upon her with a look sweeter than any smiles, sadder than any tears. The moon shone out

brightly for a moment; something white flashing in its radiance, seen distinctly through the leafless trees, caught her eye: it was the Fall. Esterel shuddered, stepped back and shut the casement: little knowing how often her mother had done the same at the same sight. Esterel shuddered because that sight reminded her of how, only a short time before her mother's feet had trodden that stone for the first time: the feet of a murderess had passed down that stair, on the way to death. Of a murderess? Did any name her so harshly? That woman driven mad by the greatness of her fancied wrongs!

"How is it I cannot forget her—that unhappy lady?" sighed Esterel. "How is it that the thought of her will mingle with my thoughts of the sweet saint, my mother?"

It had not been possible that Esterel should grow up in ignorance of the facts respecting the death of the Lady Maria and her children: she had heard them when she was quite a child, had been told it was an act of madness; but when she asked "What made the poor lady mad?" she could get no verbal answer, only shakes of the head, gestures so mournful and significant as to impress her with a firm conviction that some mystery of dread was concealed from her. It was only from servants she had heard the story: she was too proud and reserved a child to be importunate; her questions were answered by such words as, "Some things are not fit for little ladies to know!" and never repeated. Servants did not stay long at the Hall, they thought it a ghostly, gloomy place; those who were superstitious believed it to be haunted: there was not one servant who had lived there when Esterel was a child living at the Hall now.

Esterel took up her lamp to leave the oratory: how her heart beat as she laid her hand on the fastening of the door leading from it into her mother's rooms! When she had crossed the threshold, a low cry escaped from her lips, the lamp fell from her grasp, was broken, and the light extinguished. But the wind was driving the clouds rapidly over

the moon's face ; now and again she shone full and bright upon the casements, showing Esterel that the one change that had startled her was the only change that had been made since she had last entered those rooms. This change was in the place of the picture of her mother : it had been moved from where she remembered to have seen it hang and now stood on the floor, secured upright against the wall at the far end of the inner chamber, so that any one who crossed the threshold, the door between the rooms always standing open, found themselves immediately opposite to it ; and as Esterel had crossed the threshold, a ray of moonlight was on the face. This picture was of a woman in a black conventual dress ; but, for the convent head-gear, the artist had substituted a lace mantilla.

The pale, opal-toned face and the shadowy hands seemed literally to shine forth from the gloomy garb.

The face was young, and yet it looked as if it were that of one who had known more than a long lifetime of suffering and sorrow ; it expressed, more than anything, long endurance—endurance so long that it had become unconscious ; and it expressed this so strongly that one grew weary, from very sympathy, while gazing, though there was no weariness in the face. The eyes were wonderful : they seemed to transfix the gazer by their solemn questioning, while their depth of pathos was infinite, suggesting a nature with an infinite capability of suffering. Yet with all their beauty, all their power, were they the eyes of one quite sane ? Could a weak woman have endured what the owner of those eyes must have endured, and kept the hold of both life and reason ?

Having uttered that low cry, Esterel paused. Breathing in the same perfume with which the air of those chambers had always been laden, seeing all (with one exception) as she had last seen it, time and death were obliterated : for a moment she believed that she saw her mother come from that inner wall towards her. Only for a moment : then she crept on through the shadows and the barred moonlight till she knelt

before the picture—knelt at its feet, looking up into its face. An agony of longing—longing wide, deep, and strong, in which her very being seemed to go forth—came over her. If that face had stooped to kiss her, or those pale hands been laid upon her head, it would have seemed to Esterel far less unnatural than that the passionate power of her longing should have no effect.

“ If it were not that I feel I have never lost her, I could not bear to live.” The husband’s words echoed in the daughter’s heart.

Esterel cried, “ Touch me ; speak to me : be here still for me, too, mother ! ”

Esterel had no fixed beliefs nor disbeliefs. She was now under intense excitement, which she made no effort to subdue nor to control. What wonder if, yielding herself up to a sort of superstitious ecstasy, she by-and-by believed that it was no mere painted canvas on which she gazed—believed that she heard her mother’s voice and felt her mother’s touch ?

When the moon looked in for the last time, Esterel lay prostrate before the picture, her golden hair scattered over the polished floor. After that the rooms grew very dark ; there was no sound nor movement in them till morning.

When Mr. Downside returned from his early ride, he was met with the startling news that his daughter had disappeared—that Esterel’s maid had found her room empty, and that the bed had not been slept on. It was not one servant who told him this ; a number of them had assembled to await his return : fear, of they knew not what, led them to congregate : all were anxious to be the first to speak, all were curious to see how the news was taken. It was taken calmly, except that the hearer turned white, ghastly white, to the very lips.

Mr. Downside stood at the foot of the south stairs ; while his man took off his spurs, his back was to the stairs. Esterel came down them softly, in time to hear something of what was said : he felt her hand upon his shoulder and saw the surprise expressed in the faces before him at the same time. Great

was the wonder and disappointment of the beholders, when Mr. Downside, turning at the touch of that hand, simply wished his daughter "good morning," gave her his arm with his usual ceremonious tenderness, and led her to the breakfast-room.

Esterel's looks, "all as if she were in a dream, or as if she had seen a ghost," did not escape much comment in the servants' hall. Of course, all the servants knew something of the stories about the old mansion in which they lived; and from this morning that sort of feeling which, in good old times, would have led to her being burnt as a witch, began to be rife about the present lady of the Hall.

The truth was that where the moon had left Esterel the sun had found her: in a state between swooning and sleeping she had passed some hours. The fact that the servants had thronged together down-stairs to talk over her disappearance, had given her the opportunity of gaining her own room unobserved. There she had made a hurried toilet, trying to obliterate some of the traces of that night before she met Mr. Downside's eyes. She hardly noticed her maid's absence, and did not give a single thought to what that dignitary might or might not conjecture: she was still absorbed in "the vision" (as she deemed it) that had appeared to her.

It did not occur either to Esterel or to Mr. Downside to offer any explanation of what had happened; so the story of the young lady's mysterious disappearance and her re-appearance just when so many tongues were busy with her name, was added to the marvellous annals of the house. It was the story of that night only, however; for though that night was the first of many passed in those rooms, this was the only time that she allowed herself to be thus surprised by the full daylight. Like a ghost—noiselessly as a ghost, pale and bloodless-looking as a ghost—she often passed along that gallery in the morning twilight, before any one else in the Hall was stirring.

"It is frightful to think of, my darling child," Mr. Downside began, in a suppressed voice, when they were alone and

Esterel had offered a brief explanation. "Locked in! beyond the possibility of help. I implore you to promise me it shall not happen again. You might die there for want of attention!"

"To die there, at my mother's feet!" Esterel lifted up eyes in which a trance-like look still lingered. "That would be too happy and beautiful!" she said.

In vain Mr. Downside entreated for a promise that she would not again lock herself into those rooms at night. She refused, softly but obstinately, to give this promise. When his importunity drove her to a sort of desperation—the more as he half-threatened to withdraw his promise of allowing her to possess a key—she said,—

"I cannot give the promise; and I will—I must have the key. If you deny it me, or if, giving it me, you watch and restrain me, you will quickly drive me mad." She said the last few words very lowly, very slowly, lifting her eyes to her father's with a look of dark meaning.

Mr. Downside shrank back from her, the blood curdling about his heart. Yet, what could she mean? How should she know? Weak and timid always, he did not dare to try to fathom the dark depth of mystery in her eyes. He felt that she was watching him—watching the effect those words of hers had on him. Very hurriedly, very awkwardly, he turned to the topics of ordinary life. She let him do it, only sighing, very wearily, when he spoke of Southsand Castle and Lady Winstay; sighing, perhaps, so wearily, because of the weary effort it cost her to lift her mind up out of the depth to the surface of her existence.



CHAPTER VIII.

LADY WINSTAY.

THE dreaded time was almost come ; already Lady Winstay was in possession, flitting here and fluttering there, suggesting this alteration and that improvement ; having rooms, that had not been entered or opened for years, aired and dusted.

“ One would think that the odour of dust was the odour of sanctity, you are so fond of it here,” she remarked to Esterel, in her flippant manner. Esterel, with some dreamy idea of doing her duty, attended Lady Winstay on her rounds on the first morning ; but, after that first morning, she gave up the attempt to keep pace with Lady Winstay in any way. One whole day passed in her company was enough for Esterel. On the next, she took refuge in her own room for its first hours, and had Marian Fay with her as usual.

Lady Winstay was just as well pleased that it should be so ; she was a managing woman, and there was a keen pleasure in being despotic at the Hall, where she had lived in the humble capacity of governess and companion. With an earnest devotion to the successful carrying out of her own scheme, which was eminently characteristic, Lady Winstay had come to Bramblebridge a week before the day of the ball, leaving her sober-minded husband to keep bachelor-castle at home, and to follow her with his guests at the proper time. The lady greatly applauded herself for having made this sacrifice ; it was a sacrifice of some magnitude to leave a gay and brilliant circle of gentlemen, to whom she—very pretty all said, very silly some said, while others called her clever and witty—had been the centre of attraction. To leave this position, so completely to her taste, and shut herself up with the melancholy father and daughter in the gloomy old Hall, was, in fact, a heroic deed for a Lady Winstay. At the Hall she found things even worse than she had expected ; the servants more incapable,

and the resources of the house more incomplete ; and actually—this was the crowning crime of omission—till she arrived nothing had been thought or done about Esterel's dress for the ball. Indeed, Lady Winstay did a hard week's work. For her former pupil, Lady Winstay had a curiously compound feeling: admiration, pity, affection, fear, and something of that contempt which a keenly worldly nature has for what it cannot understand, mingled in varying proportions.

It was only on the morning of the day of the ball that the lady dared, or cared, to invade Esterel's morning-room. Now she did so to announce the arrival of Esterel's dress, and of a splendid present of jewels from her step-father, both ordered from London.

Esterel and Marian were busy over their books just as usual, when Lady Winstay entered, all hurry and excitement. Often as she had heard of Marian Fay, Lady Winstay had not seen her before. Something in the way Esterel introduced Marian to her, as if their station and position were equal ; something in the indifference with which her eager announcement was received, and which she felt showed her in an undignified character to "the little rustic," annoyed Lady Winstay, and set her against Marian.

"I did not think I should find you playing governess this morning!" she exclaimed. "There are a thousand things I want to consult you about. You sit here among your books till you look like a ghost. Are you ill? You look whiter than white this morning!" Esterel had again, on the preceding night, been keeping vigil.

"Am I paler than usual, dear?" she asked, turning to Marian.

"I am sure you are," Lady Winstay affirmed, turning her shoulder on Marian. "Now, Esterel, you really must rouse yourself. First, you must try on your dress ; then, you must help me to decide about the arrangement of the flowers and ornaments in the ball-room and supper-room.

"Ball-room and supper-room!" Esterel echoed, dreamily.

"Well, Marian dear, I suppose we must submit ; but I cannot do without you to-day. Go home, dear child, and ask your mother to spare you till to-morrow. Can she, do you think ?"

"If you really wish it ; if I can be of any use."

"Which I do not see that you can," muttered Lady Winstay.

"You can be of all sorts of use and comfort," Esterel answered. She tied on Marian's bonnet for her, and kissed her on both cheeks : perhaps she was a little more demonstrative than usual. With a graceful little curtsy to Lady Winstay, Marian left the room.

"So that is your little rustic friend ! The child is pretty, certainly !" Lady Winstay said : then she added, turning over the books on the table, "This reminds me of old times. Ah, dear ! it was dull work being a governess, and sometimes it is dull work being my lady ! What on earth are you not teaching that child, Esterel ? You are fond of her, I suppose, and she is, or ought to be, your slave for life, out of gratitude."

"I love Marian, and she loves me. This little bunch of early flowers she has brought me is more dear than all the costly gifts I have had to-day. Marian is grateful because it is her sweet nature to be grateful ; but I have the greater cause for gratitude, and, if I could learn, she could teach me better things than I can teach her." Esterel roused herself to say this, and said it warmly.

"That is just like you, you dear enthusiast !" exclaimed her ladyship, "never moderate and reasonable, always romantic and extravagant. When you fall in love, how you will love, Esterel ! I should not like to stand in your way as a rival : it would be steel, or poison. You do not like my chatter : your lip is curling scornfully. I do you good, notwithstanding. Anything is better for you than the life you lead when you are alone with that melancholy old Don——. Just stand with me before the glass : there ! look on this picture and on that. How plump and rosy I am. Herbert says that I look younger and prettier than I did ten years ago :—if I do, it is because I

lead an active, lively life ; while you, you look as if white fire coursed through your veins and were burning you away. Heigho ! I could be as melancholy as any one, if I would let myself. Talking of ten years ago, Herbert thought me pretty enough then :—you know who Herbert is ? Herbert Hilhouse, my cousin,—an author and quite a celebrated man now. But you are not pretty, you are beautiful ! ” Lady Winstay cried, with sudden conviction. She had been comparing her own bloom with Esterel’s want of it, quite complacently at first ; but, on a longer scrutiny, she grew less content with her own charms, and turned from the glass and her own and Esterel’s image in it to look at Esterel herself, and to express the sudden conviction that had flashed upon her.

“ It must be very tiring to talk so much, Rosa,” Esterel said. “ Will you not sit down a little while and take a book ? ”

Lady Winstay laughed. “ Why don’t you offer me a gag at once, my dear ? I won’t ‘ take a book,’ thank you. I was going to tell you about Herbert : he will admire you,” she said, with a little jealous sigh as she sat down in the chair Esterel offered her—“ because he will not be able to help it ; but he is strongly prejudiced against heiresses—in fact, against unequal marriages of any kind : he has not forgiven me for mine. Herbert has not a high opinion of women : for this I am, perhaps, answerable. I certainly did not, to all appearances, use him well ; but it was for his good in the end. What could we have done ? Both as poor as church-mice—he a tutor, I a governess. It was all for the best ; but Herbert is not of a forgiving disposition. Though he writes poetry sometimes, he does not look as if he did ; he is grave and stern, awful when he is angry and contemptuous ; no softness about him anywhere, I tell him. I mean to make him forgive me, though : I shan’t rest till he does : for I am very fond of him. Don’t look shocked ; Lord Winstay knows all about it : he is very partial to Herbert, and would like him to live with us altogether, as secretary or something. You may well look astonished : a wonderful husband Lord Winstay is ! But in

this instance I am afraid his trust is no compliment to me, only a compliment to Herbert, rather at my expense. But I do not mean Herbert to be anybody's secretary; I mean him to be somebody on his own account. He is very ambitious, and I have set my mind on his doing what he has set his mind against doing—marrying a rich wife. There are the two pretty Miss Curzons, of Deerhurst, either of them quite willing to take him."

Both the art and the nature of this chatter—and it was a curious mixture of the two—were lost upon Esterel: it is true that she heard all these words, but only as "words, words." When, at appropriate places, she was supposed to look shocked and astonished, those expressions could only have existed in Lady Winstay's imagination.

Marian's return created a diversion which recalled Lady Winstay to her self-imposed duties; as the girl was to be about, she resolved to make her useful, so she took Marian down to the great west rooms, and set her to work arranging flowers. Esterel followed them. Lady Winstay spoke kindly enough to Marian now, but with an air of patronage which hurt Esterel.

"You like to do this, Marian, so I will let you," she said; "but come, as soon as you can, up into my rooms," she added, as Lady Winstay carried her off to try on the important dress.

By evening Lady Winstay had worried and wearied Esterel nearly to death—"All for her good," as she told Lord Winstay, "to rouse her; for really it is like living with one who is walking and talking in their sleep to live with Esterel: and I want her to appear to advantage—especially to Herbert."

"Lady Winstay, Lady Winstay! What is that busy, shallow brain of yours plotting?" asked her lord.

"No deep mischief, my lord, if the brain is so shallow," she answered.

The approach of the time for the solemn duty of the toilet sobered Lady Winstay. Having satisfied herself that Esterel's dress was perfection and could not fail to do itself justice, she,

at last, left Esterel in peace with Marian, only enjoining that the maid should be summoned soon.

"Oh, Marian, I *am* tired," Esterel breathed out when the door closed upon Lady Winstay : she sank down upon a couch and clasped her hands over her forehead—a frequent gesture after she had been wearied or excited. "I am glad that I shall not live long," she continued : "how tiring life is !"

Marian took her station at the head of the couch, and proceeded to do, what she often did for Esterel ; those firmly-clasped fingers unclasped at the first soft touch of hers, as she bathed the hot forehead with a cooling essence ;—meanwhile she cooed,—Marian's voice was always something like the cooing of a wood-pigeon—"Dear Miss Esterel, is it right to talk in that way ? You cannot know that you shall not live to be very, very old. And don't you think we ought to be glad to live ? The world is made so beautiful, and all the innocent wild creatures seem always happy, and as if they were giving thanks—do you not think we, too, ought to be happy, and to give thanks for life, only life, if we had nothing besides ?"

"The innocent wild creatures do not have to give balls, nor are they talked to death by Lady Winstays."

There was something like a scoff in Esterel's light tone.

"I must not go on talking," said Marian, "you are tired out with listening already !"

"Not with listening to you ; go on, Marian."

"I was only going to say that I've heard Lady Winstay is very kind to the poor people at Southsand ; not only giving them money, but doing them good in other ways."

"Yes, she is kind ; she is meaning to do me good now !" said Esterel wearily.

"How I wish"—Marian began, and paused. When Esterel bade her speak she said, "I do wish you could love life, dear Miss Esterel ; I do wish something would happen to make you forget all your sadness and learn to love life : sometimes, when the spring first comes, when the sun is warm for

the first time, it seems so beautiful just to feel it and just to feel alive."

"I know," answered Esterel, "I have felt that; but if, Marian, when you thought of the future and looked on through years to come, you always saw something dark and dreadful and worse than death waiting and watching for you, could you wish to live long enough, to walk far enough, to come up to that place where it was waiting and watching?"

Marian's cheek paled at something in the tone in which those words were spoken. It seemed to her like the low sobbing sound she had often heard in the wood before the coming of a storm. There was a little pause before she spoke, then it was in a clear brave voice.

"When you reached the place, dearest Miss Esterel, might not the thing you had been afraid of turn out to be nothing, just as the ghosts I used to be afraid of disappeared when I had the courage to go up to where I fancied they stood?"

"I don't know, Marian: I don't know. It might be so, but I don't know!" Esterel answered. Then she lay quiet, with her eyes shut, till Marian suggested that it was time she should begin to dress.

A gleesome, innocent pride Marian had in her beautiful mistress. She was standing surveying her from a little distance, with her hands clasped together and her sweet face beaming with pleasure; she had just said, "The dress is like moonlight, the white silk shines through the white lace like the moon through white clouds," when Lady Winstay rustled in, proposing that they should at once descend to the ball-room to see if any finishing touches were needed anywhere before the guests arrived. Lady Winstay had assigned to Marian a place and an office for the evening.

"You will want this," Marian said, offering to put over her friend's shoulders an Indian shawl of which she knew Esterel was fond.

"Not *that* to-night, Marian; something else: that was

my mother's," she added in a whisper. Lady Winstay declared that no extra wrap was needed, as she had taken care that the house should be perfectly warmed all over. They took their way, traversing several galleries, and passing through stout doors that were usually kept securely fastened, down the grand staircase into the grand hall.

They paused a moment under the full blaze of the lamps, Lady Winstay soliciting Esterel's admiration of the way in which the grim hall had been decorated, so that the gloomy old portraits looked down upon thickets of flowering plants and shrubs.

At that moment the hall-door was opened, and some gentlemen entered from the portico where they had been smoking and watching the sunset. Lady Winstay screamed, for a great dog who rushed in with them approached Esterel, and seemed about to spring upon her: the dog was wet and shaggy; but before any mischief had been done he was captured by his master, who seemed to be in the same condition, and consigned to the care of one of the men-servants."

"Just like you, gentlemen," was Lady Winstay's greeting. "Idling and smoking: not dressed yet! Always leaving the important things to the last moment! Just like you!"

"You do me, at least, injustice in this instance, my lady!" quietly answered the owner of the dog. "I am certainly innocent of the charges of either idling or smoking. I have been hard at work all day, and have but just fought my way through the wet wood, to find as I got here that that scamp Hero had followed me."

"Miss Downside and yourself present, Lady Winstay," Lord Winstay said with his formal gallantry, while his eyes rested on Esterel with unmistakable admiration, "who can be expected to have eyes at liberty to observe our appearance?"

His lady dropped him the lowest of curtseys, and then said—

"Now begone all of you, pray, and re-appear as quickly as possible."

Mr. Hilhouse, the owner of the dog, towards whom Lady Winstay had studiously avoided looking, stepped forward to open the door towards which the ladies were proceeding, carefully evading the possibility of contact between his wet and muddy garments and their wide-spreading, glistening draperies. As he did so, bowing as they passed him, he fixed a look of satirical inquiry on Lady Winstay's face; she answered it by an expressive glance of displeasure. With a deprecating shrug he turned away, and followed the other gentlemen up the staircase.

"I did not present Herbert to you because he was not fit to be seen; but he seemed quite unconscious of that fact: he never will be kept in the background! His eyes asked me what I meant by the omission. Poor fellow! he is not so handsome that he can afford to be taken at a disadvantage." So said Lady Winstay as she and Esterel passed up the long room. Esterel returned no answer. As he stood beneath the lamp, stooping over his noble dog, Mr. Hilhouse had attracted her attention for a moment; during that moment he had looked up, and she had met a keen glance from his eyes that had seemed meant to take her measure.

Lady Winstay took an early opportunity of presenting "Herbert" when she considered him "fit to be seen." Later in the evening, she said to her husband,—

"In spite of Herbert's grand indifference to women in general, and his professed dislike to heiresses in particular, he seems to be making good use of his time. Both he and Esterel look interested."

"My dear, I hope you are not jealous," was the only rejoinder.



CHAPTER IX.

LADY WINSTAY'S COUSIN.

THE party from Southsand Castle were to stay some days at the hall.

"Apparently, my fair cousin, you wish to tire me of your friend's name—by your praises to prevent the possibility of mine," so Mr. Hilhouse said to Lady Winstay on the morning after the ball: which, by the way, her ladyship considered to have been a brilliant success.

They stood apart in one of the windows of the breakfast-room watching for Esterel's appearance: to all Lady Winstay's raptures about Esterel's beauty, Mr. Hilhouse had only answered coldly,—

"She is beautiful by candle-light, I grant you. Do not be alarmed, Rosa," he now continued, "to the end of the chapter I shall remain your ladyship's useful and devoted servant. I can admire a woman without falling in love; can even fall in love without wishing to marry; and as to becoming a dependent upon a wealthy wife, it is simply not to my taste."

Lady Winstay coloured and bit her lip; nay, either because the rosy lip or the lady's feelings were hurt, the tears came into her eyes. As regarded her schemes, it was well that her cousin should take such a view of her conduct; but in this she could not find sufficient consolation for the personal injustice.

"You are unkind and unjust, Herbert," she said, petulantly. "I have your happiness very much at heart."

"And always had, of course," he inserted.

"And always had, though you do not choose to believe it, sir; though you never give me credit for any generosity or unselfishness."

"Certainly, my lady, you were in one instance wiser for me than I was for myself," he said, laconically.

Lady Winstay turned to the window and gave a little sob of sorrow, or anger : she was suffering from over-fatigue, and her feelings were more sensitive than usual. Mr. Hilhouse thought he had gone too far.

"I am unkind and unjust, as you say, perhaps, Rosa," he remarked. "I know that you are kind-hearted ; that you like to have everybody and everything about you 'comfortable,' from your pet lap-dog to your pet-cousin ; but if the cousin, like the lap-dog, wants to be comfortable in his own way, which is not your way, and snarls and barks sometimes when he should lick your hand and fawn at your feet, why it is the rough, ungracious nature of the beast, and you should forgive the cousin as you would the dog."

So saying, Mr. Hilhouse turned from the window, to pay the proper homage to Esterel, who had entered the room, and to set Lady Winstay's chair at the breakfast-table beside his own,—an attention which did not fail to propitiate that fair lady.

All trace of annoyance soon vanished from her face, her laugh and her voice were among the gayest. Mr. Hilhouse was rather quiet ; his cousin, who never seemed able to let him alone long, taxed him with being so.

"I was trying to remember," he said, "somewhere in the throng last night I saw the sweetest face I have ever seen : I don't mean the prettiest, but the one expressing the most unmitigated (if I may use the term) sweetness and goodness."

"The youngest Miss Curzon ? She is a sweet-looking girl."

"Pshaw ! I know her ; hers is a most inane countenance : she has but one expression, and that is an utter want of it. I can't associate this face with bare arms and shoulders ; she cannot have been among the guests."

"Esterel's maid is pretty."

"It was not a servant's face, especially not that of 'my lady's own maid ;' and I remember noticing the simple arrangement of the beautiful hair : maids always wear caps, don't they ?"

"My maid does not; she would scorn the idea."

"I remember the 'where' now! it was in the cloak-room I saw this face. Miss Downside's dress was torn, and I took her into the cloak-room, where, she said, she could get it mended. The room seemed empty, but, from some corner, like a good little sprite, a young girl appeared to do what was needed; she knelt down and mended the dress in a moment with her clever little fingers, lamenting over the rent as she did so. No, she was certainly not a servant, for she looked up into Miss Downside's face with such a loving look, asking if she were very tired, and Miss Downside kissed her and told her to go to bed soon. It was the prettiest little scene! quite a case of a Cinderella princess and a ball-going princess; only that Miss Downside could not be suspected of playing the cruel sister, and seemed genuinely fond of this young maiden, as who would not be, if she is what she looks?"

"Remembering this scene so distinctly, I wonder why you thought it necessary to pretend that you had forgotten where it was that you had seen it?" Lady Winstay said, mischievously.

"Esterel!" this imprudent lady then cried across the table, in a way that attracted the attention of all present, "Mr. Hilhouse is praising your pretty pet! He says hers is the sweetest face was ever seen: he is quite enthusiastic. It was Marian Fay, the gamekeeper's daughter, Esterel's pet and pupil, whom you saw last night," she explained to Mr. Hilhouse in a very audible voice.

Esterel looked up in extreme displeasure, which deepened as the name "Marian Fay, the gamekeeper's daughter," was caught up and bandied from one to the other, and several gentlemen at the table—one especially, a young artist—expressed their determination to become acquainted with this paragon who had made even Hilhouse enthusiastic.

"Rosa! you are abominable; you have no more discretion than a child!" Mr. Hilhouse whispered in her ear, in no very pleasant tone.

“What have I done now?” she asked aloud, with a provokingly innocent, unconscious expression. “Lord Winstay! pray change seats with Herbert, and come and sit by me. I am quite afraid of Herbert; he is most disagreeable this morning.”

“Nonsense, my love, you can fight your own battles.”

“I insist on a change: if Herbert will not move, I will,” and she pushed her chair back as if about to rise.

Lord Winstay got up, and Mr. Hilhouse was, therefore, obliged to do the same: they exchanged seats. It is not certain, however, that Lady Winstay profited much by this change of neighbours; Mr. Hilhouse did, for he found himself next to Esterel: so, perhaps, this apparently childish caprice was a subtle and self-devoted act on Lady Winstay's part.

“You are tired this morning after all yesterday's fatigues,” Mr. Hilhouse said, observing Esterel: he had offered a few words of apology for having been the instrument, though an innocent one, of bringing Marian Fay into notoriety, and he had asked a few questions about Marian. His tone as he spoke to this white-cheeked, wonderful-eyed girl at his side was very different to that in which he addressed his cousin. Lady Winstay, with all her femininities, her prettinesses, and littlenesses, and her airs and graces, was a hard little person. This man had loved her better than she deserved to be loved; now he no longer loved her: he had no tenderness for her and no respect; only a tolerant half contemptuous liking; and this was all that his manners towards her in private expressed, though in public he was careful to act the respect she knew—and he knew that she knew—he did not feel, but which he considered to be due to her husband and her position.

For Esterel, his voice softened, and his bearing towards her had that mixture of kindly deference and of the unconscious authority of protection which has an irresistible charm for most women, when used by those whom their hearts or their heads justify in the tacit claim to superiority: an irresistible charm, perhaps, because, while it does not hurt their

self-respect, it inspires them with a certain sense of awe and of inferiority in just sufficient degree to allow them to indulge in the restful luxury of reliance on a firmer will and reverence of a higher nature. In Mr. Hilhouse's bearing towards Esterel there was also a something of intimacy; not in the vulgar sense of familiarity, but of an intimacy that based itself upon the assumption of sympathy of tastes and of modes of thoughts, and which, when used by a man whose success has been crowned by a fair amount of fame, towards a young and inexperienced woman, is in itself a delicate homage.

Do men who know their power know wherein it consists? Perhaps, Mr. Hilhouse had some experience to guide him. Ten years ago his heart had been played with, and hearts cannot be played with without sustaining damage; perhaps, since that time he had played with other hearts and had learnt to know quite well wherein lay his power, wherein his weakness.

This is not asserted: only men are not perfect, the best of them, I suppose, any more than are the best of women; and Mr. Hilhouse was certainly not even among the best of men.

It did not need much contrivance on the part of Lady Winstay to insure that Esterel and Mr. Hilhouse should see a good deal of each other during this and following days. Mr. Hilhouse was naturally a student of character; it was, therefore, natural Esterel should interest him. Esterel, Mr. Downside, and the old Hall took considerable hold upon his imagination. Much to the disgust of some two or three other gentlemen, who thought they had far more claim to Miss Downside's consideration, and who believed themselves to be far more deserving of her notice, Esterel allowed herself to be almost monopolized by Mr. Hilhouse: she was not conscious that she was so, she was quite passive; she did not seek nor shun her new friend, nor, as yet, did she recognize wherein consisted the new pleasure of her days, even if she recognized that she had pleasure in them.

CHAPTER X.

THE WOOD PRIMROSE.

MARIAN had slipped away from the Hall and home to the cottage quietly, in the early morning after the night of the festivities: of course, while the house was full of guests, Esterel could not give her the usual morning lessons, and Marian would wait for a summons before she came again.

When six or seven days had passed without her seeing Marian, Esterel, the more as there was a new, delicious restlessness stirring in her, longed for her little friend. She determined to go and see Marian, to take her some books, and set her some lessons in the Spanish that she was anxious Marian should be able to speak with her; perhaps, she had been reminded of this wish of hers by Mr. Hilhouse. She had found the night before that he could speak and read her language well, and that he had spent several years in her native country.

This morning at breakfast when plans were being discussed and Mr. Hilhouse had been invited to join some of the party who were going to a meet about fifteen miles off, he declined to do so, saying that he had writing, that must be done that day, to get through. Lady Winstay had drawn attention to what had passed on the subject by the outcry she made; she had been vaunting her cousin's bold and graceful horsemanship, and was vexed that he should not justify her boasts by riding a mare of Mr. Downside's which the rest of the party were shy of mounting, and which she had said Herbert would not scruple to use. Possibly the knowledge that Mr. Hilhouse was occupied may have had something to do, unconsciously to herself, with deciding Esterel to visit Marian on that particular morning; but while she was in the library searching for a book she had promised Marian, and which she wished to add to some that she had already selected, it happened that Mr.

Hilhouse came there too, needing a work of reference which he named. Esterel showed him where to find it, and then he reached for her the volume she sought, which chanced to be beyond her height. After that he lingered to offer to make up her parcel for her, saying as he did so,—

“Your fingers are not accustomed to this work.”

“Nor yours, I should have thought,” answered Esterel, as she relinquished to him the books, and the paper and string with which she had been trying to confine them.

“My fingers are used to most things ; in the course of my life I have turned my hand to most things,” he said : “I was always a ne’er-do-well, and a scapegrace, and such manage to get a wide experience of life. If I could not make up a book parcel it would be strange, for I tried life behind a bookseller’s counter for a short time, amongst other things : it was too slow and respectable, I suppose, for I soon tired of it ; but perhaps it suggested the idea of book-making : not that I took to that immediately. First, I sowed my wild oats at the gold-diggings in Australia, where there certainly was no great need of further seed sowing of that kind, the crop being abundant enough before. From the roughening effects of the sort of existence led there, Rosa declares I have never recovered ; however, I have been a more respectable character ever since. By-the-by, if you let Rosa know that I have given you even this slight glimpse into my antecedents, she will not forgive me.”

“Why ? ”

“Lady Winstay has naturally a distaste for early reminiscences,” he answered drily.

“How strange it must be to know so much as you do, to see so much as you have seen. What a contrast between your life and mine.”

“I should hope so ! ” Mr. Hilhouse answered energetically.

Looking up into the eyes that watched him, with a dreamy unconsciousness that they did so, as he arranged and rearranged the books,—after all he did not seem either quick or clever in making up the parcel,—he asked,

"Have you lived here ever since you can remember? I know from what you said last night that you were born in Spain, but you have lived here ever since you can remember, have you not?" .

Esterel passed her hand over her forehead, and a dim back-looking expression came into her face.

"I hardly know what I remember: I hardly know what 'remembering' is," she answered. "Sometimes, suddenly, all that is now, all the present, seems remote and strange; I breathe a different air: I am seeing and hearing new things, then—" she paused, with a look of pain. "It confuses me to try and describe," she said; "but it is as if I struggled greatly: as if just as I was about to understand myself, and the sounds and sights round me, all faded. Is this to remember?" she asked.

He was looking at her very earnestly.

"A question I dare not answer," he replied. "Would you not like to visit your native country, and try if its scenes, and sounds, and influences awoke any sense of familiarity?"

Her face kindled for a moment, then she said, with a slight shudder,—

"No, there is only one journey I want to take."

"Where is that?"

"People look pained, or angry, or as if they did not believe me when I tell them."

"Tell me, to see which of these shall I look," he said, laughingly, and with a sort of persuasive audacity.

Esterel smiled faintly.

"It is a very little journey: only to the churchyard. It is so quiet there, and no need to come back again."

Mr. Hilhouse searched Esterel's face with one of his keen, uncompromising glances. When he felt that she was simply saying what she meant, a curious fear and pity entered his mind: fear and pity that, after lying there dormant, and being nearly forgotten, were destined to justify themselves mightily. When he spoke it was earnestly, with grave compassion.

"I do not see that the churchyard is quieter than the wood, or than your beautiful garden, or than many more cheerful and healthful places."

"But I should be quieter there, because I should be dead: never, I think, while I am alive, only when I am dead, will it be quiet here." She pressed her hands upon her forehead, lifting up her face and looking out with an expression of indescribable longing.

"I do not know that you will be 'quiet' then," he said; "nor can you know it. What death is we none of us know. It may be but an instantaneous change; not even temporarily an end. According to the words of all authorities, 'both nature and revelation teach us' that it is a change, not an end. I accept this decision of the authorities, understanding by nature human nature, and by revelation the revelations from within a man's own being: not that I altogether reject other revelation. What you said just now about that feeling of the remoteness of near things that steals over you sometimes, and of the struggle to comprehend what fades just as you are about to understand it, reminds me of what I have myself experienced—this feeling may, I fancy, be a sort of misty memory of another kind of existence. As we, probably, have been, so, probably, we are to be; and the hands that weary early, and the feet that fail soon here, will perhaps have the more to do, the further to go hereafter. It is all 'perhaps' with me, you see: I am far from having made up my 'bundle of sticks.'"

"Don't kill me with weariness," sighed Esterel. "To be is enough: to have been, and to have to be, all in this same sort of struggle, and blindness, and darkness——" she put her hands over her eyes.

"I wanted to help you," he said, with something of humility in his tone: perhaps there then crossed his mind a desire for a firmer faith, even if accompanied by views he had been used to call "narrow." "I do not suppose the next life will be passed in so much struggle, blindness, and

darkness. We shall always be getting a little nearer the light, one would fain believe. What I meant just now has been said in a way that gives a hopeful glory to it by our dear poet, in that poem in which he speaks of—

‘So many worlds, so much to do,
So little done, such things to be.’

The idea of death as the end of all—or at all events of all of which we have any knowledge, therefore of all of which we are tired—has often proved a fatal temptation; especially where there is inherited, constitutional melancholy, and a want of that degree of vigorous interest in life which is sufficient to take off the sense of the weariness and the burden of it. The thought of death as the mere throwing off of a burden and a lying down to a long rest, has often given it a dangerous attractiveness. I am not alluding to flagrant instances in which this view has led to the violent shortening of life, but to those more frequent, and it seems to me, as fatal cases, where it has transformed existence into a mere death in life—a mere waiting for death and long desire for it. This could not be if we felt sure that we all have work to do; that what is left undone now will have to be done hereafter.”

“I do not know what led us to talk of such strange things,” Esterel said: that, with a heavy sigh, was her only answer.

The final knot had to be tied round the book-parcel: it could no longer serve Mr. Hilhouse as an excuse for lingering; but he was not now at all inclined to return to his work in his solitary room, so he told Esterel that the books were heavy, that, as she had a bonnet on, he presumed she was intending to take them somewhere, and asked if he might accompany her. If he wished it, if he could spare the time, she should like it, she answered; but he need not come merely to carry the books, a servant could do that.

“Don’t deprive me of my excuse for a walk in this south-

wester with a fair and gentle companion," he said. "Besides, my curiosity is roused ; I want to know for whom these books are destined."

" For Marian : Marian Fay."

" ' Marian Fay,' ought I to remember who Marian Fay is ?"

" You noticed her face in the cloak-room that night ; she was spoken of at breakfast the other morning."

" The gamekeeper's daughter ! These books for her ? My dear Miss Downside !"

" Of course it seems strange to you ! you do not know Marian," Esterel answered. " I am glad you are coming with me ; I should like you to know Marian."

Lady Winstay was sunning herself in the conservatory at the end of the south terrace, when Esterel and Mr. Hilhouse went down the steps into the garden. To the expression of satisfaction that crossed her face when she saw them together, succeeded one of annoyance as she noticed the parcel, evidently containing books, and the direction of the path they took.

" Esterel is a fool if she is going to introduce Herbert to that pretty Marian Fay," she exclaimed aloud : fortunately there was no one to hear her. " The child is so pretty, with such a winning look in her great eyes ; and Herbert, with his natural taste for low life, would just enjoy to do a thing of that kind." The " thing of that kind," so darkly alluded to, being the contraction of an honourable marriage with a girl beneath him in station.

Untroubled by any such forebodings as occupied Lady Winstay, Esterel and Mr. Hilhouse pursued their way. Mr. Hilhouse talked, and Esterel listened ; designedly he led back to topics kindred to those glanced at in the library : whether generally philanthropic or not, Mr. Hilhouse felt a strong desire to be of use to Esterel.

The south-west wind was sweet, and fresh, and strong ; what Mr. Hilhouse said seemed to Esterel as fresh and strong. If he was not in any high sense a good man, yet Mr. Hilhouse

had known high aims in life ; and had some sympathy with ideal views of life ; while at the same time he seemed to have a firm grasp of it, as something palpable, and given for practical use. Think of Esterel's vague dream-life, her shadowy superstitions, and more shadowy beliefs, and you will understand something of the influence such a nature as his might have over hers. As Esterel eagerly drank in all he said, it seemed to her as if the ground grew firmer beneath her feet ; as if the objects round her were nearer and more real ; as if the sunshine were warmer and brighter ; and that the southwest wind was sweet, and fresh, and strong, was a fact she knew and felt with all her being.

"But it will all fade again when you are gone," she said, answering an inward consciousness more than any words of his.

What Esterel said was often thus abrupt in sense, being but a link snapped from a long chain of tangled thought : in manner she was never abrupt ; that was always slow and soft, her voice always low and sweet-toned.

"What will all fade when I am gone ?" Mr. Hilhouse asked.

She answered him simply, without a shade of embarrassment,—

"The feeling that things are real, and that everything means something, that has been growing over me while I have listened to you."

He smiled rather a self-satisfied smile, but made no other answer ; for they had just reached the gamekeeper's cottage, and he was interested in seeing what was the local habitation of the pretty maiden with the pretty name for whom the strangely-assorted books he was carrying were destined. The presence of a Spanish dictionary and vocabulary Esterel explained by saying she was trying to teach Marian Spanish ; that she longed to have some one with whom she could talk it sometimes, lest she should forget it, and that to hear it always made her step-father so intensely sad that she dared not speak it to him.

Marian, knowing there were still guests at the Hall, had not at all expected a visit from her mistress ; she was no less neat and dainty to look at than usual, but she opened the door with her dress sleeves turned up, and her arms whitened with flour. Unobserved himself, standing just outside the latticed porch, Mr. Hilhouse watched her ; there was bright pleasure, no shame nor confusion in her manner, as, when Esterel kissed her, she laughingly put her floury hands behind her and said,—

“ I am not fit to come near you, dear Miss Esterel ; I had but just finished making the bread.”

“ She is not spoiled yet,” Mr. Hilhouse thought, as he followed Esterel into Marian’s little room ; as he did so, bowing to Marian, who held the door open while they entered.

Marian came in after them, dusted her hands with her apron, and set some chairs ; then, quietly excusing herself in a few low words to Esterel, she disappeared for some moments : this gave Mr. Hilhouse time to look round the room, and notice its books and ornaments, which he did most accurately.

“ Marian always has a glass of flowers in her room,” Esterel said, as Mr. Hilhouse bent over those on the table ; the first gathered wood-primroses, not yet quite open, guarded by their tender, not fully developed leaves, heedfully placed in a glass of crystal clear water. Mr. Hilhouse bent low over the blossoms, looking into their mild, half-veiled eyes ; as he did so, he received a pleasant impression of the young maiden, who must have sought for these blossoms carefully, and who having found them had not cast them aside to wither, but cherished them as precious possessions : he smiled to himself, as one does smile to oneself sometimes, “ for nothing,” in the sunshine.

Just then Marian came in ; she had washed her hands, neatly fastened her sleeves at the wrist, and freed her pretty hair from its light dusting of flour ; that was all.

Esterel now introduced Mr. Hilhouse to Marian and Marian to Mr. Hilhouse : and “just as if I were a lady,”—as Marian told her mother afterwards,—Mr. Hilhouse received the introduction. “Just as if he were a gentleman,” she might as well have said ; for no gentleman, under those or any circumstances, would have treated Marian Fay otherwise.

Mr. Hilhouse had to unfasten his own parcel ; a righteous judgment upon him, he declared, as he fumbled with the many knots, and, at last, had to cut the string. Esterel wanted to explain something about her lessons to Marian, and to point out to her an easy passage which she might translate.

“It is very kind of you, dear Miss Esterel ; but ought I to keep you now ?” Marian asked.

“I do not think Mr. Hilhouse will mind waiting a few moments,” Esterel answered, understanding the question, and looking at Mr. Hilhouse inquiringly.

“Not in the least.”

He had returned to the study of the primroses, and glanced up from them to reply. He was amused to see how absorbed mistress and pupil then became in the matter before them ; he was forgotten, and felt himself quite at liberty to make his own observations. By the full daylight and in that pretty cottage-room, Marian seemed to Mr. Hilhouse even more lovely than he had thought her before. The repose of her expression—the expression not of her face only, but of her whole being and doing—was what struck him as her peculiar charm : whatever she did—if she moved or were still, if she spoke, or listened, or smiled—she seemed to do with no reserves, but with her whole self ; this at-oneness with herself, making her, as it were, to draw breath serenely, gave her a simple grace and unconscious dignity. “There will always be an atmosphere of purity and peace round that fair child : the very atmosphere a woman should live and move and have her being in, the very atmosphere a man might rest and grow holier in,” Mr. Hilhouse thought. He was roused from his passivity by an appeal made to him to solve a grammatical problem which

puzzled Esterel, who knew her native tongue instinctively rather than grammatically.

Approaching, he bent over the book which lay between Esterel and Marian ; then, those two lovely faces looking up at him, he briefly and clearly explained away the difficulty.

With that the books were closed, and Esterel rose to take leave. Mrs. Fay was gone to Deerpark, Marian explained, and her father had taken his dinner out with him that morning, as his business took him to the far border of the forest.

"Are you often alone all day?" asked Mr. Hilhouse. "This is a solitary spot for you to be left alone in. How can you amuse yourself?"

"I am not very often alone, but I have plenty to do; the days are not too long, sir. Miss Esterel is so kind, always lending me beautiful books, and when I have nothing else to do and do not want to read, there is plenty of amusement always in watching the live things in the wood and listening to the trees."

Mr. Hilhouse held out his hand in leave-taking, bending a smile on Marian, which she did not forget; then, just as he had turned away, he asked,—

"May I have one of your primroses? They are the first I have seen."

"You are welcome to them all, sir; I know where I can pick more to-morrow." She brought him the glass and looked up at him with her childlike directness; she was pleased that he liked her flowers. But Mr. Hilhouse would only take one blossom and one leaf to sheathe it in. Then he waited for Esterel in the porch, for she had lingered to speak to Marian some last words. Marian had said, "It is a pleasure to see you, dear Miss Esterel! You look so much better!"

Esterel answered,—

"I feel quite different this morning, Marian; perhaps it is that spring is really come again at last. Can you tell me one thing that puzzles me, dear?" she asked, pausing and playing with Marian's hand. "Mr. Hilhouse has been talking in a

way that, in some things, is like your way, Marian, and yet is quite different. I think I know, or can find out, what is the difference; but how comes it there is any likeness? Is it that you both know and believe things that I do not? That you have the same religion?"

"Dearest Miss Esterel! do not speak as if you had no religion."

"I do not think I have, Marian: when I am well enough, I sometimes go to church, you know; but that is not having a religion. How do you manage to believe what you ought to believe?"

"It would be wonderful if I did not believe the things my mother has taught me ever since I could understand them."

"Oh! that is it! My mother only taught me not to believe what she had believed; told me it was wrong, and those who taught it cruel. Then she died before she had taught me what I should believe, and left it all dark."

Marian kissed the hand that was restlessly playing with hers; just then she could not say anything, there was not time: Marian was never quick to speak.

"Come to me to-morrow morning, I cannot do without you any longer," Esterel said, as she left Marian and joined Mr. Hilhouse.

"I begged that primrose as something to remember your wood-primrose by," Mr. Hilhouse explained to Esterel as they left the cottage behind them. "Probably, I may never see Marian Fay again, and it is a fancy of mine to accumulate characteristic memorials of those who have impressed me."

"And you have a very characteristic one this time. I like to hear you call Marian my wood-primrose; that is what I sometimes call her. But, Mr. Hilhouse, I hope you will see Marian again; I have thought of a pleasure for her, if you will give it to her and to me?"

"Certainly, if it is in my power," he answered, in a way that showed he was thinking about something else as he spoke. Esterel did not explain then what she wanted him to do, and

he asked a question in the reply to which he appeared keenly interested. "What are your views with regard to this young girl's future, if I may venture to inquire?"

"You mean"—Esterel paused, perplexed by the abruptness of the question, and by the fact that she was not often guilty of having "views;" then, remembering what had been urged to her by Mr. Downside about Marian, she said, "I hope you do not mean that *you* think I am doing wrong in making a companion of the gamekeeper's daughter, and cultivating tastes which she has and those round her have not?"

"I am inclined to evade any wide question of right or wrong. I was thinking more of what would be the result with regard to this young girl individually, than of what is right or wrong in the abstract. At present, she seems quite unspoiled and perfectly content and happy; but if you should take from her the power of being content and happy in her humble home, among her humble kindred, what could you give her instead?"

"You think, then, that I injure Marian's prospect of happiness, by sharing with her my only happiness?"

"I would not be so cruel as to say so."

"But you think so?"

"I am only questioning, I am not dogmatizing. A simple life of love and duty is the happiest for women; perhaps for men too, but certainly for women. If you give a young man an education above his station, he has the chance of going out into the world, finding his own level, making himself a station to fit his education; to some extent my own case: my parents were in very humble circumstances. Can a young woman do this? You would not wish it."

"But I wish to take nothing from Marian, only to give her something besides."

"I know that is what you wish; but I do not know that it can be done. Observe, I do not say it cannot, but I do not know that it can. Things are so equally balanced that nothing is gained, it seems to me, except by loss; nothing won without cost. A capacity for enjoyment is always, also, a

capacity for suffering. I cannot see exactly what, according to the usual course of nature, is to become of Marian Fay, a perfect little lady as she seems. One thing is to be said, that is—that there is no necessity I should see : I am neither her godfather nor guardian.” He tried to give a laughing turn to matters ; he had felt it a sort of duty to point out a danger to Esterel, but he did not wish to hurt or grieve her : now he added, “ You, I am sure, are far too kind and good to give up Marian thoughtlessly, at any time, as a toy you are tired of ; there might be danger of some capricious ladies doing this.”

“ I love her too well to do that.”

“ After all, exceptions prove the rule, and what might be dangerous and unwise in some instances, may be wise and safe in this. There are some natures that cannot be spoilt, they say ; if this is so, this little maiden’s may be one of them : she seems true and simple to the heart’s core.”

“ Not only seems, but is.” Esterel was, notwithstanding his efforts that it should not be so, saddened. “ For any unhappiness or harm to come to Marian through me would be dreadful,” she said, dwelling on the words.

“ At present it is evident that a great deal of pleasure and happiness come to her through you,” Mr. Hilhouse said, heartily, as if he thanked her for her goodness to Marian. “ Your pace has been flagging for the last five minutes,” he added, “ I am afraid mine has tired you. Pray take my arm and use it up all these flights of steps.”

“ That does not look so bad ! ” commented Lady Winstay, who had loitered in the conservatory to watch for their return, and saw them coming slowly up the long flight of steps and along the terraces, Esterel leaning on the offered arm. “ Not so bad ! ” she repeated, and then gave a heavy sigh. “ I shall have to give up Herbert ! Esterel will suffer no divided allegiance. It is many a long day since I have seen Herbert look so—what’s the right word ?—interested ; but Esterel ! he must have been taking her too far. Certainly if I were a

man and did not care to be a widower pretty soon after I was a bridegroom, I should be rather afraid to marry Esterel ; but if she has a good husband and is taken away from here——. It certainly is very kind of me to be so bent on finding Esterel a good husband, and Herbert a rich and beautiful wife ; and I am bent upon it.”

Saying this to herself, very emphatically, Lady Winstay left the conservatory and sauntered along the terrace towards Esterel and Mr. Hilhouse.

She made no exclamations and asked no questions ; for which Mr. Hilhouse, remembering how he had excused himself for running counter to her wishes that morning, was grateful. Instead of attacking him as he had expected, she began to abuse him for having tired Esterel to death, thereby having shown a truly masculine want of consideration. Lady Winstay was fond of denouncing what she was pleased to consider as masculine vices ; fond of insisting upon the inferiority of the masculine nature on many important points ; perhaps, because she was unconsciously conscious (if that phrase may be allowed) of the possession of a superabundant number of feminine vices, and of the absence of some of those virtues in which women are supposed to surpass men. So attacked, Mr. Hilhouse could do no less than express his penitent concern. How clever some women are in drawing men on into tender familiarity towards other women, when they wish to do so ! And, of course, Esterel exonerated him, denied that she was particularly tired, asserted that the morning was beautiful, and that she had enjoyed her walk. They only separated to meet again at luncheon, and then Lady Winstay claimed her cousin's services, he being the only available gentleman left at home, to drive herself and Esterel to Deerhurst.

“ You are not going to the Curzons ? ” he asked.

“ Don't be alarmed ! ” laughed the lady. “ It is the town I want to go to, not the park.”

“ It is a long drive for Miss Downside, and that road is

exposed and windy. Are you not showing a feminine want of consideration in proposing such an expedition?"

"Don't mock me, sir! I shall wrap her in furs from head to foot, and the sea-breeze will do her good."

Wrapped in furs, in delicate white ermine, Esterel looked very charming, like some princess of a northern fairy-tale.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPANISH LESSON.

"I SHALL fly!" Lady Winstay exclaimed, pettishly. "I do not think this school-room work will be at all amusing."

"It will remind you of the past with unpleasant vividness," Mr. Hilhouse remarked.

Esterel had made her request to Mr. Hilhouse. It was that he would read a poem of Camoens, and a scene or two from Calderon to herself and Marian, and, after that, hear Marian read and look over her translation.

"Your little friend may not like this arrangement," he objected.

"Marian likes anything that I like for her, and she is too simple to be shy," answered Esterel.

Lady Winstay and Mr. Hilhouse were with Esterel in her own morning room. Lady Winstay was very much out of temper on hearing this arrangement. When, from the window, they saw Marian Fay coming through the shrubbery, she rose to put her threat of flight into execution; and meeting Marian on the staircase, she brushed past her with a salutation that made Marian feel she must in some way have offended her ladyship. Her great offence was that she looked lovely, fresh and sweet as a wild rose with the morning dew and bloom upon it.

“What an absurd business!” grumbled Lady Winstay. “Is Esterel so confident of her own attractions, that she only regards this pretty child as a foil? She is falling over head and ears in love with Herbert as fast as she can! But what is the use of my slaving and scheming if she undoes all I do? I wish this Marian Fay were farther off!”

Lady Winstay went to look for her lord, to have the satisfaction of being with somebody to whom she could be cross; not finding him, she consoled herself by a flirtation with the young artist, Mr. Andrew Anson, who had been one of her guests at Southsands, and had been staying a few days at the Hall: though not staying there now, he was always about in the grounds or in the woods, having taken a lodging in Bramblebridge village for the purpose of sketching in the neighbourhood.

At first this meeting did not seem likely to have a soothing effect upon Lady Winstay, for the young man was full of the beauty of a young girl with whom he had just met, and who, of course, proved to be Marian Fay.

“I am quite sick of that girl’s name!” her ladyship exclaimed; on which hint Mr. Anson chose another subject for his raptures.

When Esterel explained to Marian that Mr. Hilhouse was going to be her master that morning, Marian’s eyes widened for a moment with surprise; then, in her quiet way, she took her usual place, as Esterel bade her, and busied herself in arranging her books, placing them before her new teacher open at the right places.

“We will have the correcting exercise business first and the reading afterwards, I think,” Mr. Hilhouse said to Esterel, as he took the pen Marian offered him after she had first dipped it in the ink. He had taken his place at the end of the small oval table, and had Marian on one side, Esterel on the other.

If Mr. Hilhouse felt any embarrassment in his novel position, he did not show any.

"Must I correct the errors? Will not pointing them out do?" he asked Esterel. "It seems a shame to disfigure this fair page of pretty writing with my ugly scrawl. Your corrections," he added, looking back, "are so much more in harmony with the original."

Assured that he must himself amend what he found amiss, he proceeded to do so; but did it remorsefully. Looking up from the book now and then into Marian's face, at first only to be sure that she understood his explanations, he, by degrees, became a little too much occupied with that face to be a very strict critic of the exercises: he was occupied in trying to decide what was the exact colour of the eyes, and whether the face pleased him most when those eyes met his frankly, yet with an unconscious homage in them, or when the lashes rested on the cheek—in observing the varying colour of that soft cheek which was so near him, what delicate rose tints it took, how the blood mantled into it and faded from it, and what a peach-like down covered it; then, again, that white temple, from which the hair was drawn back, how fairy-like were the pencillings of the eyebrow that softened off to nothing there, and how pretty was the tracery of the blue veins under the clear skin. Occupied with all this, it is not wonderful if, sometimes, the gaze fixed upon the face was longer than that which perused the page, and some errors passed unheeded. After the business of correcting translations and exercises had been disposed of, the reading began: sometimes Mr. Hilhouse and sometimes Esterel briefly explained to Marian the purport of what Mr. Hilhouse read; then he had an opportunity of marking how quick of apprehension the young girl was, when once she had firm hold of a clue.

The time passed rapidly: when the luncheon-bell rang and Lady Winstay swept in, they were all surprised to find how late it was.

"For two hours, ever since the rain came on, I have been playing hostess most laboriously!" Lady Winstay exclaimed, in an accent of reproach.

"Rain! does it rain? I thought it was a fine morning, and that we were the only people indoors."

So saying, Mr. Hilhouse closed the book from which he had been reading, rose, and sauntered towards the window.

"It was a fine morning, but it has been raining in torrents for two hours. Mr. Downside and Lord Winstay came home drenched, and I got wet through, though I was only in the shubbery-walks when the rain began."

Marian had left the table at Lady Winstay's entrance, and was now putting on her bonnet.

"You cannot go, dear," Esterel said.

"Quite out of the question," decided Mr. Hilhouse from the window. "The wind is blowing furiously: you could not hold up an umbrella."

Lady Winstay looked from one face to the other, and drummed upon the table with her fingers, impatiently. "Will she do it, I wonder?" she was asking herself. Yes, Esterel did do it. What? Asked Marian to come down with them to luncheon; saying that it was Marian's dinner-time, that Mrs. Fay would know it was the weather that kept her, and that, perhaps, it would be fine again by-and-by. Mr. Hilhouse turned sharply round to look at Marian: he had an opinion as to what she had better do; but of course it was no business of his, so he said nothing, only awaited the result of the little discussion between mistress and pupil.

"Take off your bonnet, dear, and come with us," urged Esterel.

"Indeed I cannot, dear Miss Esterel," Marian answered, firmly.

"Indeed you must, dear Marian. You have often had your dinner with me at my lunch-time before. You need not be afraid, you shall sit between me and Mr. Hilhouse, and we will take care of you."

"I am not afraid, no one would notice me."

"Come then, dear."

"I must not, Miss Esterel. It would not be right,

though you are very kind to wish it. My mother told me that though when you were alone I might do as you wished about such things, when there was company here I was never to forget that my proper place would be with your servants." Marian spoke out bravely, driven to bay by Esterel's soft urgency. Mr. Hilhouse felt his cheek grow hot at her last words, but Marian did not blush: she had no shame about her position.

"Your mother is a sensible woman," said Lady Winstay, "and you, Esterel, are crazy. In what a position you would place both the child and your guests! And what a very unsuitable thing it would be altogether!"

"If I am mistress here, Lady Winstay, I think I may ask whom I please to my table." Esterel's tone was no less soft and sweet than usual, nor was it quickened, for all that it was inconceivably haughty; Lady Winstay drew back from the expression of her face, while Marian's eyes filled with tears of distress at finding herself an object of dispute.

"I will not make you do anything you do not think right, and that your mother would not wish you to do," Esterel then said, turning to Marian. "But I cannot have you go out in this weather, and the proper place of one I love is not with my servants. Will you stay here for the present, and let me send you up some luncheon?"

"If you insist on going home now, I shall go with you, to see that you are not blown over the wood into the sea," Mr. Hilhouse said, smiling.

Of course Marian was reasonable, and stayed where she was.

Mr. Hilhouse gave his arm to his hostess, and Lady Winstay followed them down the stairs to the room where luncheon was served.

"Did you think it a very extraordinary thing that I should ask Marian to eat with us?" asked Esterel of Mr. Hilhouse. "You said nothing."

"I should think no generously impulsive act extraordinary

from you, but I did not wish the child to avail herself of your kindness. I thought it better that she should not. She would not have passed unnoticed; and I, who know the world of which you know nothing, know that there are men among your guests whose notice of a pretty girl in a humble position would be no gain to her."

"I ought to have thought of that, perhaps."

"How should you? To tell the truth, I did not know whose conduct to admire most, yours in urging, or your little friend's in refusing."

"Spoken like an intolerable coxcomb," said Lady Winstay, from the stair above, in the speaker's ear. She had been following close enough to hear what they said.

"My dear Rosa! I hope you will be in a better humour when you have had your lunch."

He spoke those words carelessly; but, nevertheless, the colour on his dark face deepened: perhaps because he was conscious that he was open to the accusation brought against him.

Marian ate something of the luncheon sent up to her, then she knelt down by the window; as she did so, she saw a bracelet lying on the ground, picked it up and put it beside her: it was Lady Winstay's, she knew. Resting her folded arms on the cushioned window-seat she watched the weather. March was roaring in lion-like, the wind swept up from the sea in gusts that swayed the more flexible timber in the wood and snapped the most stubborn, and the rain was driven past in sheets. Marian, to whom idleness was strange, began to dream as she watched the wild commotion: the sort of dreams that do not jar against the realities of life, because in their innocent vagueness they offer no points of contact. If there had been a little pain at Marian's heart, caused by Lady Winstay's abrupt rudeness—frankness and common sense her ladyship called it—it had very soon passed away: Marian was too really simple and humble-minded to know the rankling pain of wounded self-esteem and vanity. It would not have been

natural if the kind gentleman—who, by his manner towards her, made her sometimes feel “just like a lady,” sometimes like a fondled child—had been quite absent from her dreamy thinking; his smile and the kindly flash of his eyes were pleasant to recall, and she did recall them.

By-and-by the little dreamer heard the noise of approaching voices and laughter. The room in which Marian was, besides its door into the gallery running along the southern wing, had a door opening into a vestibule in which were other doors, one leading into a music-room, which was the last of the suite of west drawing-rooms. To this apartment some of the guests came, having ascended the grand staircase, and passed through the whole range of west reception chambers. Marian shrank a little, recognizing Lady Winstay’s voice and laugh; but, presently, her heart bounded with pleasure, as that lady’s brilliant playing, and clear, bird-like singing hushed other sounds. That door of Esterel’s morning-room which opened into the vestibule had a curtain over it, and was usually kept locked: Marian did not know that it was not now locked. Almost suspending her breath, to lose nothing of the sweet sounds, Marian gave herself up to enjoyment. When Esterel’s voice, exquisitely rich and always seeming laden with subdued passion of melancholy, succeeded Lady Winstay’s, Marian listened with quivering lips, and the tears falling down her paled cheek. But, by-and-by, when she knew that it was no longer Esterel’s voice or touch to which she listened, Marian—who had been up long before daylight to prepare the lessons for which the duties of the day left her no leisure, who, too, was all unused to this luxury of sensation—became drowsy; her cheek declined upon her arm, which rested on the crimson cushions, and, gradually sinking into the prettiest, most natural of attitudes, Marian fell asleep.

The roaring of the wind combined with the sweet strains of music to lull her into a deep sleep, which lasted some time.

She woke up, flushed and frightened, as Lady Winstay, in

full dinner-dress, opened the door from the vestibule, and pushed aside the curtain, saying, as she did so,—

“I am quite sure I must have dropped it here this morning!”

Marian thought of the bracelet, and put out her hand to feel for it; for she could not see it, the room being dark, except for the light that streamed in from behind Lady Winstay, and did not happen to fall on Marian. She could not feel the bracelet; this alarmed her: what had she been dreaming about? She was quite nervous—her heart was beating loud and fast. She heard Mr. Hilhouse say,—

“Here is your bracelet, Rosa.”

To her relief, Lady Winstay turned directly. “Why did you not give it me before?” she asked. “I suppose you picked it up this morning when I dropped it; put it on for me, now!”

Marian saw the plump white arm extended, and saw Mr. Hilhouse stoop over it to clasp the bracelet; then they both re-entered the music-room, shutting the door behind them. The vestibule and the room where Marian was grew dark again. It was a relief to Marian not to have been observed: but had she not been observed?

How had Mr. Hilhouse come by the bracelet? This question the little prisoner asked herself; and her cheek flushed afresh, as she recollected that Mr. Hilhouse could not possibly have obtained the bracelet without seeing her there asleep! for the bracelet had lain close beside her face. Marian jumped up, and was just groping for her bonnet, resolving now to run home through the dark, rain or no rain, when Esterel floated in, carrying a light, and looking, Marian thought, beautiful as an angel.

“Here is the little prisoner, as I told you,” Mr. Hilhouse said, following Esterel in, and closing the door behind him. “I take her in charge: the rain is over, now I will go home with her and be back in no time.”

“So the poor tired child has been asleep!” Esterel said, kissing her. “I forgot you, dear!”

"It was very idle of me ; I might have gone home before I had not fallen asleep. Pray, Miss Esterel, do not let this gentleman trouble to go with me, I am not the least afraid to go home alone."

"But this gentleman means to see you safe."

"Put on your bonnet quickly, my child ; I am going to get my hat and coat ; run down to me at the garden door : I mean the door on to the terrace."

"Mr. Hilhouse is a gentleman who will do as he chooses, I fancy, Marian," Esterel said, smiling, in answer to the pleading look ; so there was nothing for Marian to do but to obey.

Having been kissed by her mistress, and having pressed her lips to her mistress's hand, Marian ran down and gained the terrace unobserved, as Mr. Hilhouse hoped she would be able to do : he joined her immediately.

"We must really run," he said, "or I shall be late for dinner ; you must guide me, for I don't know the way in the dark ; give me your hand."

Again there was nothing for Marian to do but to obey. He put her hand through his arm, and away they ran—literally ran : he paused once or twice to ask if she were out of breath ; then, on they ran again.

At the gate of the cottage garden he took the little hand from his arm, pressed it as he wished her "good-night," and ran back again towards the Hall at full speed. Marian had been treated unceremoniously certainly : but, perhaps, there was a true respect in this want of ceremony ; it put her at her ease, proving to her, had she needed proof, that Mr. Hilhouse had wished to see her safe, as he said, and that was all. He would not have treated a lady so, certainly ; but then all the circumstances would have been different. Marian smiled to herself, as she said,—

"He thinks me a great deal younger than I really am ; but his voice sounds so very kind when he says 'my child !' "

Marian did not have a very pleasant reception : it hap-

pened that, in spite of the rain and wind, young Stubbs had walked over to the cottage to return a book Marian had lent him on his last visit.

Hurt and disappointed to hear that she was up at the Hall, he had said some hard things, to the effect that no good would come of it; that some of the gentlemen staying there would be ready enough to run after a pretty girl like Marian, and so on. Poor Jacob had gone too far, and Luke had answered him roughly, to the effect that he hoped he might be trusted to look after his own girl, and that those so ready to think evil were generally up to no good themselves. For all this, after he was gone, Jacob's words took effect. Luke sat and smoked his pipe, and, by-and-by, the mandate went forth that Marian must go to the Hall no more while there were visitors there. "The poor young lady up there don't want her for company now, and our girl's best at home."

Marian was questioned about the day, and told everything quite frankly.

"A gentleman brought you home, you say?" Luke looked across at his wife. "What sort of a gentleman? Young and handsome, of course; girls think all gentlemen that."

"Don't be cross with Marian, father," pleaded Mrs. Fay.

"I'm not cross; but I don't like these doings. What sort of a gentleman, I ask you, Marian?"

"Well, father," said Marian, reflectively, meeting her father's look with an open, innocent gaze, "it's not so easy to say, all in a minute: not very young, nor handsome, nor gay, but very kind and pleasant, and a very clever gentleman. He writes books, mother!" She turned a kindling glance upon her mother.

"What should a clever gentleman who writes books have to say to you?" her father asked, with an inward chuckle.

"He didn't come home with me because he had anything to say," Marian answered, simply. "We ran too fast to talk, or he would have been late for dinner. He brought me home

because it was dark, and, I suppose, he thought I should be frightened to come alone, though I told him I shouldn't be."

A few days afterwards, Luke Fay was able to judge of Mr. Hilhouse for himself. Before leaving the neighbourhood, that gentleman wanted to see the sweet face of the wood fairy again. Lady Winstay was hurrying off from the Hall with all her guests, and insisted on carrying Mr. Downside and Esterel back to Southsand with her: sea air would do Esterel so much good, now that the weather was milder. On this plea, Mr. Downside's consent to the plan was easily won, and Esterel did not offer much resistance. Mr. Hilhouse made the announcement of Esterel's departure an excuse for visiting the cottage; though, as she would certainly not have left without seeing Marian, it could be only an excuse; but Esterel, glad that he cared to see her little friend again, gave him a message and a book to take with him; to this book he added one he himself wished to give Marian.

Luke Fay was at home when Mr. Hilhouse called; the two men had a long chat in Marian's parlour, while Marian sat at work by the window. Mr. Hilhouse pleased Luke. The father stood near, flattered and approving, while Mr. Hilhouse, bidding Marian good-by, begged her acceptance of the little book he had brought for her, told her he should often think of her, hoped she would not quite forget him, and wished her every happiness. He himself was returning to town soon, he said, and from thence he thought of going abroad; having no ties, no home, no kindred, he was always somewhat of a roamer. Marian blushed and trembled—with pleasure? nay, the tears came into her eyes. But Mr. Hilhouse was so sedate and grave in appearance, so paternal in his manner, that Marian's father and mother thought nothing of it, though he held the child's hand and looked into her face longer, far longer, than there was any need.

As Mr. Hilhouse left the cottage he saw young Anson, the artist, folio in hand, cross and re-cross one of the narrow wood-paths opposite to it. The young man presently overtook him.

"You seem highly privileged both in Hall and cottage, Hilhouse!" he said, hotly. "I haunt the place to try and get a chance introduction to the little beauty, and I see you in the inner sanctuary, quite at home there!"

"Miss Downside was pleased to make me the bearer of a parcel and a message to a young girl at the cottage, in whom she is interested."

"You're a deuced lucky fellow: beauty at either end! I wish the fair Esterel—why, the mere name is enough to drive a fellow madly in love—would make me the bearer of her messages; I'd take them if they were to the old gentleman himself."

"There are disadvantages as well as advantages in such a reputation for gallantry as you enjoy!"

"There are advantages as well as disadvantages in such a reputation for gravity as you enjoy, evidently," mocked the young man. "But I won't be altogether baulked; I want that girl's face for my picture, and I must have it."

Somehow the recollection that Marian was occasionally alone in that lonely cottage all day, came very vividly before Mr. Hilhouse's mind.

"Do you know Luke Fay, the father of the young girl you speak of?" he asked, significantly.

"No."

"I would advise you to make his acquaintance; also that of a sturdy young bailiff, her suitor, before you proceed any further."

"Fierce, eh? I'm not a man of war. All things considered, you think I had better give up the hope of becoming acquainted with the wood-nymph, eh?"

"Speaking as a friend, I think so, decidedly."

"And the heiress of the Hall?"

"You are free to do what you can."

"Monopoly there, too; Hilhouse, you really are too bad!"

"My badness, in this respect at least, is purely a work of your own imagination."

CHAPTER XII.

WAVERING.

It was April before Mr. Downside and Esterel returned to the Hall. Lady Winstay had induced them to protract their stay at the Castle far beyond the time they had at first intended to return home ; the change and the sea air were doing Esterel so much good, she said. Lady Winstay was certainly encouraged to believe herself a very potent little person. Those plans of going to town and then abroad, of which Mr. Hilhouse had spoken to Luke Fay, appeared to have been abandoned at Lady Winstay's bidding. It is more probable that their execution was merely postponed, that they were not abandoned till later ; but her ladyship, believing in her own success, told Esterel that Herbert, finding the neighbourhood so attractive, had settled at Southsand for the present, and would probably write his new book there, instead of establishing himself in Switzerland or Germany before he began it, as he had intended.

When Esterel returned to Bramblebridge, she went at once to the cottage, but Marian was away on a little visit to an aunt living at Deerhurst. Esterel missed her, and at first was impatient for her return ; however, the aunt fell ill, and Marian, from a visitor becoming a nurse, stayed a few weeks instead of a few days ; so Esterel had to get used to doing without her. She hardly knew it herself, but after the first, she felt Marian's absence (which made it impossible for her to resume her self-imposed duties of instructress) to be a relief. Life at the Hall did not settle down into its former monotony. Esterel herself had a restless, expectant mood upon her. The intercourse between the Castle and the Hall was frequent, the fine weather, the lengthening days, and her desire to advance the object she had at heart, often tempting Lady Winstay, accompanied by some of her guests, to drive or ride to Bramblebridge.

For the first two or three weeks after the Downsides had returned home, it appeared to Lady Winstay that her cousin was somewhat restive; he did not enter as she could have wished into her plans for promoting intercourse between Bramblebridge and Southsand. Once or twice he even positively refused to ride over to Bramblebridge, when asked to do so, with some note or message for "dear Esterel," suggesting that a groom could ride on her ladyship's errand, and that his time was more valuable than a groom's.

Lady Winstay did not like the look of this: she could only hope that the mood was temporary; that it meant no more than the last struggle of a proud spirit which rebelled against its growing thralldom. With a curious mixture of pain and pleasure, she had watched—while pretending to see nothing—her cousin's manner towards Esterel; she was satisfied that if he were not already "in love," it was merely because his stronger will beat back the strong passion. A little more intercourse, a few more of those looks which now and then flew forth from Esterel's eyes, without her knowledge more than against her will—for they were so purely involuntary that she was unconscious when they escaped her—and Lady Winstay hoped the stubborn, reluctant knight would be tamed and led captive. And then?

"And then," Lady Winstay said to herself, crushing her little plump hands together and looking quite fiercely at her own image in the glass, "I hope I shan't begin to hate Esterel because he loves her." Really there was a strange amount of unselfishness in this selfish little woman's conduct: or was it not rather selfishness at second hand?—a dangerous form of selfishness, for it will do cruel and unscrupulous deeds and suffer little from the accusings of conscience. Of course, when a change took place—when, from seeming reluctant, Mr. Hilhouse began to appear desirous to undertake commissions to the Hall, or commissions that took him into its neighbourhood—Lady Winstay interpreted this change according to her wishes and according to the probabilities

of the case, as she saw it: but did she see the whole of it?

It was quite certain that the nearest horse-road from the Castle to the Hall was not that which passed by the game-keeper's cottage. Mr. Hilhouse either did not know this, or had his own reasons for preferring that way, for he never took any other. He always rode slowly past the cottage; sometimes he saw Mrs. Fay in the garden, sometimes he met Luke in the wood. As he always stopped for a few words, he knew of Marian's absence and of what delayed her return. He liked to hear them speak of her: now she was away they praised her freely, but even more by their words, by their looks and tones when they named her. He knew, too, just when she did return; he passed the cottage several times after that, and did no more than lift his hat and bow low, seeing her at her window; not even stopping, as had been his custom, if Mrs. Fay was in the garden. If, however, he failed to see Marian's sweet face, he rode home disappointed, and in a mood which ensured to Lady Winstay a lecture for one or another of her frivolities. It seemed, on the whole, as if he avoided rather than sought a meeting, for he did not go to the Hall at those hours when, as he supposed, he would have found Marian there. What did he mean by these contradictions? He meant that he did not yet know what he meant. Esterel bewitched him, Marian charmed him; he did not wish to *love* either of them, yet one face or the other was always before his mind.

Riding past the cottage later than usual one evening, he saw Marian in the garden: it struck him that the lovely little face looked thinner, paler, and graver than when he had first seen it. His heart demanded to know the cause. Dismounting, and throwing his bridle over his arm, he waited at the gate for Marian to come and speak to him.

"Are you quite well, my child?" he asked, with his grave tenderness, as he took her hand, leaning over the low gate. He was flattered by the way the face brightened and by its

eager expression as she came towards him ; but her words gave him the right key to that expression.

"Thank you, sir, for stopping to speak to me. You are just come from the Hall, are you not ? How is Miss Esterel ? I want badly to hear something about her."

"You have not seen her lately ?"

"Not since I came home. Is she quite well, sir ?—quite well for her, I mean."

"You have not seen her since you came home ! She is well, I believe, for her, as you say : she looks frail always ; but just now, I fancy, a little less frail, and a little less melancholy. The sea air at Southsand did her good, Lady Winstay says. You are too much choked up with timber about Bramblebridge, we dwellers at barren and bare Southsand say. But how is it you have not seen your friend since your return ?"

"Perhaps Miss Esterel does not know that I am come home ; and my father made it a rule that I should not go to the Hall unless I was sent for—unless Miss Esterel told me to come."

Mr. Hilhouse, standing outside the gate, tapped his boot with his riding-whip, and looked thoughtfully upon the ground. Marian's eyes were drooped upon a flower she held in her hand, and unconsciously she counted and re-counted the petals.

"Shall I tell Miss Downside, next time I am at the Hall, that you are come home, and that you are fretting for her ?" asked Mr. Hilhouse, looking up suddenly.

"I never fret," Marian answered, smiling at the word, which she thought sounded as if Mr. Hilhouse took her for a spoilt child. "I have never had anything to fret about," she added.

"What shall I tell Miss Downside, then ?"

"Nothing, sir, about me, if you please."

"Do you wish her to forget you, then ?"

"She will not do that," Marian said, with a bright,

trustful look. "She will come soon to see if I am home ; she did come while I was away. I am not afraid of her forgetting me, and, as you say she looks better, and not so sad, I can wait quite happily till she wants me."

"If she does not come?"

"It will be that she is busy, or for some other good reason. Please, sir, say nothing about me, it would seem as if I had complained ; and, after all these years of kindness, how ungrateful of me it would be to complain because I had been at home a few days, and she had not come to see me."

"You are very fond of 'Miss Esterel!'" he said abruptly, with something almost like jealousy in his tone.

Looking up into his face with her loving eyes full of tears, she said,—

"I love her very dearly : I only wish I knew some way to show her how I love her ! Nobody could help loving her who knew her as I do, I should think ; especially nobody to whom she had been so kind as she has been to me. Oh, sir, is she not beautiful?" Marian asked, flushing with enthusiasm.

"Certainly she is," he answered, smiling into her earnest face. "Very beautiful. I am not to say anything about you, then?"

"If you please not, sir."

"I make no promises." He had not yet made up his own mind as to what course he would take about this and more important matters.

"I do not ask you to promise, sir ; you would not do anything that was not kind and right. What is right you know better than I do, for you are a great deal wiser than I am."

"Yes, I am, a great deal!" he said, smiling still. "In their generation, the children of this world are wiser than the children of light." He held his hand out over the gate in leave-taking.

"Your mother is not at home, I know," he said, "for I met her as I came. Next time I pass I will call in, if I may; perhaps, I shall see her then: may I try?"

Turned suddenly upon with such a question, Marian could only utter a few indistinct words of confused gratitude; confused, not because she attached any peculiar meaning to the words, but because it seemed to her so extraordinary that Mr. Hilhouse should humbly crave permission to confer so great an honour. It did not occur to Marian to question whether anybody could think it wrong for her to stand talking at the gate thus, or for her to give her permission to the gentleman to call at the cottage; she had entire confidence in Mr. Hilhouse. If the question had been raised in her mind she would have answered,—“Mr. Hilhouse knows what is right, and would not do anything that is not right: I need not trouble about it.” To her imagination, this Mr. Hilhouse was already some one above and beyond ordinary mortals;—there was a time coming when, as he took her by the hand and smiled upon her, calling her “my child,” or “my little friend,” she would long to fall down upon the ground and kiss his feet. And why? for any merit of his? for any good he had done her? No, just that she longed to do it! There was no reason in the longing—none!

Mr. Hilhouse rode through the wood slowly that evening, his dark face looking full of thought. The birds sang their loudest and sweetest, the budding boughs nodded at him, little flashes of sunset light ever and anon struck across his eyes, his horse, fidgeting under the steady restraint of the heavy hand, often swerved aside as some “live thing” from the wood ran across his path;—none of these things roused Mr. Hilhouse. Once or twice he smiled to himself, as if at some pleasant fancy of his pleased dream. When they were clear of the wood, out on the open common, a sudden impatience seemed to seize him; giving his horse the rein, and touching him with the spur, he dashed off, keeping on at one swift pace for miles and miles beyond the turning leading

down towards the Castle, which the animal had recognized and tried to take.

That day Mr. Hilhouse was late for dinner; that day he shunned Lady Winstay's scrutiny and questioning; and yet his face wore an expression of secret elation. That day Lady Winstay held to be an era: from that day she never found her cousin an unwilling messenger on any errand that even tended towards the Hall.

Lady Winstay stifled her inward triumph; perhaps she stifled it so successfully that she crushed all the joy out of it, and only left the bitterness. After that evening her manner towards Mr. Hilhouse was often bitter, sometimes almost spiteful. He remarked it one day, and asked, "What is the matter with pussy? She always wears claws, I know, but generally she hides them under her velvet gloves. Why are the gloves so often taken off of late?"

Mr. Hilhouse did not repeat that question, nor ask any kindred one. Something in the pettish flash of temper, half pain, half anger, with which he was answered, led him into the mistake of supposing that his cousin more than half divined a secret of which he was ceaselessly conscious. It was the more natural that he should suppose this, because he noticed that about this time Lady Winstay ceased to exercise her ingenuity so much in contriving errands that should take him to the Hall: simply because she thought her contrivance no longer necessary: but from some people we look for any rather than simple motives.

In spite of his new willingness to ride either to or towards Bramblebridge, it was not very often that Mr. Hilhouse called at the cottage. The gamekeeper's daughter inspired respect by her sweet and grave simplicity, her child-like purity and truth. As things stood at present—and Mr. Hilhouse was inclined to linger over their present pleasantness, to lengthen out the luxury of their novelty and freshness—it was not well to call often at the cottage. He did not wish to assume that he would be always welcomed there merely because the appa-

rent difference between his position and Luke's would make the visit an act of condescension from a superior to an inferior; and yet this difference of position was great enough to prevent its appearing natural that he should call there as often—things being as they were at present—as he might have done, had he and the inhabitants of the cottage been on terms of equality. But there was the probability of seeing Marian at the window, the chance of seeing her in the garden, the possibility of meeting her in the wood, to give a charming interest to the rides that took him past her home.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE WOOD.

ON May-day—it was a sunny-eyed, balmy-breathed May-day—Lady Winstay had, as she supposed, taken pity on her cousin; having written a note to Esterel, the speedy delivery of which she said was important, she asked Mr. Hilhouse to ride with it to the Hall. He took charge of the note, but chose to walk to Bramblebridge. He wanted, he said, to see how far spring was advanced in sheltered and solitary places, and he wished to penetrate into the very heart of the wood. It was a long walk, and he lengthened it by lingering and by losing himself; that is, he found himself making direct for the Hall, and already in sight of its stacks of chimneys, when he had thought he was taking a circuit that would sweep by the cottage: altering his course then, he lost his way.

His loss proved to be his gain, for, near a track that led from the cottage towards one of the lodges on the outskirts of the wood, he caught sight of the gamekeeper's daughter; saw her as he parted the hazel-boughs, long before she saw him. Approaching her noiselessly, cautiously avoiding to place his feet on the dry branches and twigs with which the March

winds had scattered the ground, he paused quite close, still unobserved, to watch her. She was sitting at the foot of an old, half-decayed oak-tree ; her bonnet and a little basket lay beside her ; her lap was full of wild-flowers, and her flower-like face drooped over them. It had rained in the early morning, and the flowers glistened with moisture ; but so did Marian's lashes, and this could hardly be from the same cause.

Going a little nearer, this time not looking upon the ground, Mr. Hilhouse trod upon a crackling branch ; Marian started up, scattering her flowers at her feet.

There was unmistakeable gladness in the surprise with which Marian recognized the intruder. Indeed, she said quite frankly,—

“ Oh, sir, I am so glad it is only you.”

Spoken as Marian spoke them, those doubtful words implied a sweet flattery.

“ And I am glad to meet with you,” he answered. “ I want a guide, I have lost myself.” He stooped to pick up her flowers, collecting every blossom, bud, and leaf that had been plucked by the “ dear little fingers,” though she begged him “ not to trouble.”

“ I will not ‘trouble,’ ” he said, “ but I will gather them all up, every one of them, nevertheless. You must sit down again to arrange them. I shall be glad to rest a few minutes, for I have made myself warm with fighting through the tangled thickets of this enchanted forest.”

Marian sat down again, and he laid her flowers upon her lap in a confused heap, that needed to be ordered before she could take them home.

“ You gave me one of the *first* primroses you gathered this year,” he said ; “ now give me a little nosegay with some of these, the *latest* in it.”

Marian began to select the fairest of her flowers. She did not put blue bells or rose-campion in her nosegay, they were too large ; only frail, fairy-like blossoms and delicate leaves of the wood-sorrel, the wild strawberry, and the sweet-scented

woodruffe, with one or two least-opened primroses, and the smallest, youngest of their leaves. Mr. Hilhouse seated himself on the ground below her, and, with his chin rested on his hand, watched her dainty choice of the daintiest of her treasures.

The young artist, Andrew Anson, should have been lurking near: he would have given much to have had that picture in his sketch-book. The fair young girl at the root of the crumbling old tree, this year's fair blossoms in her lap, and last year's withered leaves strewing the ground at her feet; but if he had introduced another figure into his picture, he would have wished it to be that of one younger and gayer than Mr. Hilhouse.

"You started like a frightened squirrel when that dry stick crackled under my foot," Mr. Hilhouse said, presently. "And when I first caught sight of you, you were not looking as blithe as such a good little maiden should on such an exquisite May morning. Has anything happened to hurt or vex my little friend? Look up and tell me!"

His tone was irresistibly tender; his eyes, when she managed for a moment to meet them, had something in them which overcame her. Great tears gathered in hers, and fell down upon the flowers.

"Dear child, I cannot bear to see you so troubled. Tell me, what is it?"

Marian turned her face aside, leant her soft cheek against the rough bark of the tree, and wept. Mr. Hilhouse sprang up, and made a hasty movement towards her: the wish to give that pretty head a gentler resting-place was natural enough; but he checked himself and turned away.

Marian soon resumed her task, saying,—

"I am very foolish, but I could not help it. It was your speaking to me so kindly, sir."

"It was not only that," he said, standing before her, "you had been crying before I came. Tell me who has been speaking to you unkindly? Tell me what troubles you?"

"I think it is everything, more than anything," Marian answered, smiling now.

"Has Esterel—Miss Downside, I should say, been to see you yet?"

"No, sir." She said that quite wearily.

"You are fretting now, then; though you never fret!" He wished to make her smile again. "Is it that chiefly which makes you sad?"

"Not that only; I do not know if it is chiefly that. But I do long to see my dear young lady again, to kiss her dear hand again, before I go away."

"Before you go away! Where are you going?" He asked the question so sharply that she looked up startled.

"My father says he shall send me to my aunt at Deerhurst again."

"May I ask why? Do not answer if the question is impertinent."

Marian hesitated and blushed—a deep, painful, burning blush.

"I see my question was impertinent. Do not answer it!" He spoke coldly; he was greatly troubled by that hesitation and that blush.

"You could not ask me any question that would be impertinent," Marian answered, speaking, in spite of that hot colour, with grave simplicity. "I do not know why I should mind telling you; I should like you to know, for fear you should hear things said about me, and should think harm of me."

Marian turned from red to white; there was a little touch of the meek pride of wounded modesty in her manner, as she went on,—

"One of the gentlemen who came to the Hall with Lord Winstay has been lodging in the village since: he was often about our cottage a little while ago, and now he has begun to come about it again. Father has heard some talk about me in the village," (the disappointed elder Stubbs had been setting

gossip concerning Marian and Mr. Hilhouse afloat,) "my mother would not tell me what, and this and the gentleman's—he is a young artist-gentleman, and always carries a sketch-book with him—hanging about the place so, has made my father angry. He says it all comes of my going to the Hall: that I shall never go there again, and that he will send me away from home."

"Have you ever spoken to the young artist?" Mr. Hilhouse asked, as sternly as Luke Fay himself would have done.

"Once, when I was in the garden, he spoke to me over the paling, asking the way to Deerhurst."

"Which he knows as well as he knows his own name! Impertinent puppy."

"Is it about this young puppy and yourself that people have been talking?" he asked, after a pause.

"I believe not; mother said she would not worry me by telling me all, but that somebody had been working up father—putting things into his head that he would never have thought of himself."

"It is somebody who is jealous of me, perhaps?"

Marian looked up quickly, the innocent, trustful expression of her face clouding over for a moment, so that Mr. Hilhouse felt at once reproved and punished. What right had he, as things stood at present, to ask such a question in such a tone?—the half jaunty tone of a successful lover.

"I have heard of a suitor of yours, the son of Mr. Downside's bailiff. If you have been cruel to him he might be revengeful," Mr. Hilhouse said, apologetically.

"Jacob is too good to say anything for mischief that he knew was not true," Marian answered, with a remorseful consciousness that, involuntarily, she had, perhaps, been cruel to poor Jacob. "It was his father who was so angry about it," she added, naïvely.

"I think I can be of some use to you." Mr. Hilhouse had now resumed his grave, paternal tone. "At all events, I

will try to be of some use to you. You have made me my nosegay; will you not give it me now?"

A strange reluctance to lift her eyes to his face was upon Marian: she put the flowers into the hand stretched out for them, without looking up, saying, "They are such fragile little things, they are drooping already."

"I will give their fair heads a resting-place." He took out a large memorandum book, and laid the flowers between two blank leaves, writing something in pencil beneath them.

"Not that I am likely to forget," he remarked as he did so.

Marian had risen and tied on her bonnet; she took her basket on her arm and stood ready to start on her walk.

"Let me go first: you can direct, but I will walk first to clear your path," Mr. Hilhouse said.

The wood-path was too narrow for them to walk side by side till within a few yards of the cottage. Mr. Hilhouse proved a most careful pioneer, pushing the brambles out of Marian's path, and holding the hazel boughs back here and there, where they encroached more than usual; now and then, he allowed himself a smile or a few kind words, but, for the most part, the walk was a silent one. Marian, sweet little Marian, felt as if she were walking in a dream.

When they were in sight of the cottage, Mr. Hilhouse said,—

"Do not again, just now, go so far from home alone."

"But I am obliged to do so, sir. I have to feed the young birds at the Frostend Lodge, where no one is living now."

"What! You have been there, right through the most lonely part of the wood?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, I used to feel as safe in any part of the woods as I do in the cottage garden."

"'Used to,' Lady Una, perhaps; but you do not now, or you would not have jumped up as you did at the sound of my footsteps."

They were at the garden gate by this time. Mrs. Fay was in the garden watching her bees.

"Marian, child, what a time you have been!" she exclaimed, without looking up, when she heard the latch of the gate lifted.

"Go in, Marian, I want to talk to your mother," Mr. Hilhouse said, gently: it was the first time he had called her "Marian." "Bid me good-by first!" he added, as without a look or word, the bewildered little maiden was about to obey him. She gave him her hand, and then directly he released it, went into the house, into her bedroom at the back of the house, opened the casement, and sat listening to the pines: they had never before spoken so sweetly.

Mrs. Fay had left her bees when she heard Mr. Hilhouse speak; she came to the gate to meet him. She did not greet him as cordially as usual; not that she, in any way, mistrusted him, but people must not have any handle for "talking about Marian:" he gave them one, if he walked with her as he had been doing to-day, and so she meant to tell him.

"I can speak to you here as well as anywhere, and I must not stay long," he answered, to her invitation to walk in. "There are only the trees to hear us, and the innocent wild things that Marian talks about."

Mrs. Fay found no opportunity for speaking her mind, as she had been quite prepared to do. Mr. Hilhouse, hat in hand, leaning over the gate, began to say something that quite changed the current of her thoughts. He spoke in a low voice, with a pleading manner; and as Mrs. Fay listened, many changes in as many seconds flitted over her upturned face; doubt, displeasure, surprise, delight, followed each other rapidly.

When she spoke, it was with smiles and tears, struggling one with the other.

To what she said, Mr. Hilhouse answered,—leaving the gate, after he had pressed her hand, settling his hat upon his head firmly, as if with a sense of something done,—

"Then I have your promise. You will keep my secret at present, and you will keep your daughter at home. In return, you have my promise that she shall not be troubled by the young artist, and that my secret shall be no secret soon."

From the cottage Mr. Hilhouse went towards the village, striking through the wood in a northward direction, his destination being the farmhouse where Mr. Anson lodged: he found the young artist at home. What he said to him seemed greatly to astonish that young gentleman; who listened with as many changes of expression as Mrs. Fay had done, only where she had looked delighted he looked studiously incredulous.

"Perhaps I ought to have stopped you at the outset," he said, "to let you know that your confidence is unnecessary; but really you took my breath away. I leave you to play out your little game quite unmolested, for I am moving off this evening, and am packing up my traps now. I will keep your secret, of course, and I will try to do what is far more difficult—that is, to digest the little dish you have prepared for me. If she only knew it, I think there is more danger lurking under your air of grave respectability than under my gay gallantry, of which she has been so shy. But it is not my affair: I am no knight-errant to be warning or rescuing distressed damsels. I am going away this very evening, I give you my word I am! So, whatever happens, I shall have no hand in it."

"‘Whatever happens!’ Explain yourself." Mr. Hilhouse spoke angrily, irritated by the scoffing, scampish tone: his haughty anger provoked the other to further insolence.

"There is nothing to explain: I mean absolutely nothing, I assure you; certainly no offence. I suppose you know you are not handsome," he continued, coolly; "she may get tired of you, or frightened at your grave face; then if she should run away to the arms of some younger wooer! Why, such things have been and will be."



CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE TERRACE.

It was late in the afternoon when Mr. Hilhouse reached the Hall. The wonder was that he reached it at all, or thought any more of the note from Lady Winstay to Esterel, with which he was charged.

Thoroughly tired, heated, and rather hungry, too, he was not in the best of humours when he arrived there.

The interview with young Anson had irritated Mr. Hilhouse more than he would have chosen to confess. It had not only irritated, but had also pained him; given him the sort of smarting pain we feel when we suffer a mental grazing off of the skin of some tender part. The bloom, the first ineffable, irreplaceable bloom, had been, by a coarse and careless hand, brushed off a sensation, passion, relation, call it what you will, that for its distinctive charm was peculiarly dependent upon untouched freshness.

When people are already out of humour, additional causes of annoyance spring up close to hand abundantly. Mr. Hilhouse found something displeasing in the way he was welcomed by Miss Downside's maid; whom the footman, not knowing whether his mistress were at home or no, summoned to speak to him: there was something of over-eagerness to assure him that her lady would wish to see him, something almost like patronage in her smiling friendliness, which, no doubt, would have been acceptable to a timid lover; but, as Mr. Hilhouse did not appear there as a lover, and had he been a lover would probably not have been a timid one, the Abigail's manner was not acceptable to him. He proceeded to the terraced south garden, where he was told he should find Esterel, in a sullen mood.

"Every one to their taste," the offended dignitary remarked, with a shrug, as she looked after him: "that ugly, gloomy fellow would not be to mine!"

Esterel was pacing slowly up and down on one of the sunniest, most sheltered paths.

"You must have walked here, to-day," she said, coming to meet him, with outstretched hand.

"I did; but why do you say I must have done so?"

"When you ride I always hear your horse's hoofs on one part of the road, and I have not heard them to-day." Even this simple remark and explanation annoyed Mr. Hilhouse: were his movements watched, then? he asked himself. The warmth and brightness of that spot where he found Esterel, even Esterel's dress and look, came in for his disapprobation this afternoon. Over her morning dress of embroidered white cashmere, Esterel wore an Indian shawl of crimson richly wrought with gold; this shawl had been a present of Mr. Downside's to her mother. Esterel had seen her mother wear it, and she loved to wear it herself; fancying that when she wrapped it round her, something more than the softness and warmth of the shawl environed her. Esterel's white skin, having some secret affinity with heat, perhaps, did not burn nor freckle, so she took no pains to shield it from the sunshine, which caused its whiteness to be positively dazzling, and which made her beautiful hair, with its rippling waves and burnished coils, seem as if, living, it gave out rather than received the glory in which it shone and shimmered.

Mr. Hilhouse recalled the image of Marian in her pale lilac dress, as he had come upon her in the dim coolness of the wood, with the little lights and shadows flickering over her dimmed and downcast face, and with the tender green haze, made by myriads of half-fledged leaves, fluttering forth through all the underwood, reflected on her pretty hair.

To complete the contrast, Esterel had in her hand rich-perfumed flowers which she had just gathered from the conservatory; flowers—the fragrance of which her mother had loved—which she destined for her mother's room. Some of these blossoms were almost as delicate-hued as Marian's wood

treasures ; but, for all that, the overpowering character of their fragrance, even their very pallor, suggested thoughts of tropical passionateness and luxuriousness.

"How can you endure the heat and glare here?" Mr. Hilhouse exclaimed, shading his eyes with his hand. "It seems to me intolerable ; and you yourself are such a glitter of white, crimson, and gold, that you literally dazzle me. I am, as usual, the bearer of one of Rosa's important missives ; but I should think that even your eyes cannot read in this glare."

"I have been thinking it just warm enough to be pleasant here," Esterel returned : "but you are tired and heated with walking ; shall we go into the house, or sit under the shade of that cedar?"

"I will not take you indoors ; I must not stay long, but I must hear if this note requires any answer." He still held it in his hand. "I met Mr. Downside just now, so I do not inquire if he is at home."

"He is not gone to Deerhurst, then ? he said he was going to ride there."

"It was on the Deerhurst road I met him ; I did not come here direct. I have been in the village."

He was farther annoyed at having to give that explanation.

"In the village ! you must be tired : what a walk you have had," Esterel said : then she hospitably urged him to take some refreshment, which he refused to do.

They were going towards the seat under the cedar.

"How very powerful the perfume of your flowers is," he exclaimed. "It is those Cape-jasmine blossoms ; we have quarrelled about them before." Examining her nosegay, he continued, "I never do appreciate the heavy odours of some exotics, nor the gorgeous dyes of others. I love a more subtle and delicate fragrance, and a purer, cooler-tinted beauty. In fact I think one English primrose, fresh-gathered and dewy, worth all such flowers as these that ever grew !"

Esterel bent her face over her despised blossoms.

"I love all your cool, mild-eyed English flowers," she said, "but I love these, too; I love these with a passionate love." Her tone was so low, so soft, he hardly caught her words. "I feel as if I should like to breathe out my own life while I breathed in the fragrant life of these creatures. Though they are forced into bloom here, they bloom in their own homes as freely as your primroses bloom in the wood there. Why should you despise them?" She raised them to her lips.

"Perhaps because of my liberal share of an Englishman's overweening insular pride, which is apt to despise what it cannot call native."

"But you should not have that pride."

"Why not?"

"It is not noble. Now look at this! Can anything be more pure in colour or graceful in form?" She selected a spray of drooping blossoms that resembled a falling shower of stars, and held it towards him.

He took it in his hand.

"As to colour," he said, "it is not white, but 'passion-pale,' burning away with the white fire in its veins. As to form, it seems to languish in its own heat, and it is intoxicated with its own perfume. It is true that passion may be pure, and fire as chaste as snow; but fire, passion, and intoxicating fragrance are food more fit for gods than for men." Giving her back the starry cluster, he added, "You cannot convert me into loving such flowers as those as I love a primrose."

Esterel was silenced: something within her shrank from the tone and manner in which he spoke those first words; while in the last there was a ring of defiance that pained her. They had reached the seat under the cedar; she shuddered as the shade fell on her, and drew her shawl close round her.

It was some time before either of them spoke; they heard the cooing of wood-pigeons, the frequent call of the cuckoo, the hum and murmur of multitudinous insects destined to die

soon, when the sun went down. From where they sat they could catch, now that the trees were not yet fully clothed, the flash of the Fall, and could follow the course of the stream marked by the abruptly broken lines of the wood where small land-slips had left bare rock projecting here and there; they could see where the wood ended and the undulating lines of the moor began; then, beyond all, the flashing mirror of distant sea. In the warm light of that golden afternoon the scene was passing fair; they both gazed at it intently, and perhaps it would have been hard to say which paid to it the smaller heed.

Mr. Hilhouse gave an inward start, when presently Esterel's words made him know that her thoughts had taken the same direction as his; yet from where they sat, they could not see the smoke from the gamekeeper's cottage. What was there to make Esterel think of Marian just then?

"Mr. Hilhouse, have you chanced to see Marian in riding past? Do you know if she is come home yet? From day to day I have been meaning to go again to the cottage."

Mr. Hilhouse would far rather that Marian's name had not been mentioned between them. In what followed he was drawn on involuntarily to say what he would rather have left unsaid.

"She is at home, I have seen her," he answered briefly.

"Has she been at home long? I thought she could not be come back, or, as I told her mother to ask her to do so, she would have come to see me. Has she been back long, do you know?"

"Let me see! It must be above a fortnight since she came home."

"A fortnight, and I have not seen her? Marian must have left off caring for me, then."

"A very unfair deduction," he said, irritably. "Consider your relative positions and put it the other way—that Marian has had reason to think that you have left off caring for her."

"Marian knows that I do not think or care about any difference in our 'relative positions.'"

"All the more she should bear it in mind."

"Has she been waiting to be sent for, then?"

"Waiting, because her father forbade her to come unsummoned; indeed, I think he has forbidden her to come at all. Meanwhile, she has been pining for you, growing noticeably paler and graver than she used to be."

"Poor Marian," Esterel said, dreamily. "She cares for me so much, then!"

"She loves you faithfully—as, I should think, is *her* manner of loving." A slight accent gave the words a sting.

"I have not thought of her as I ought; I should have remembered about her father—I have been cruel to you, poor Marian," Esterel spoke, softly and humbly.

"And 'poor Marian' has suffered not a little," Mr. Hilhouse said, sternly. Esterel's gentle, dreamy tone irritated him strangely to-day: yet often, on other days, it had exercised a singular charm over him, lulling him into a lotos-eating mood.

"The faithful little heart has never wavered in its allegiance," he went on. "Everything is her fault, nothing yours. But I think that, perhaps, you are more right than you seem to be earnest in accusing yourself. I think you had well-nigh forgotten your little friend—given her up as you might a toy of which you had tired!"

Mr. Hilhouse spoke without looking at the fair, frail girl beside him—spoke, looking out, straight out to sea, in perfect ignorance, perhaps, of the gulf which his words and manner to-day were opening between this and former days, when he had thus sat beside Esterel, but had talked to her in so different a tone; in perfect ignorance, too, perhaps, why he was the last person in the world who should so reproach her, and of how heavy-handed and cruel was the way in which he dealt what he deemed a just blow.

Esterel did not speak nor stir upon hearing those words;

her face was a little averted: she was trying to realize both what she heard and what it meant—trying, trying, vainly. As if at a sudden blow, the blood had come surging to her brain; it was ringing and singing there, and her heart was beating heavily and painfully: besides this, she felt stunned and stupid.

Mr. Hilhouse had time to think that, perhaps, he had spoken too plainly; time to grow a little uneasy lest he had quite committed himself with regard to Marian. Turning towards Esterel, he could see nothing of her face save the white oval of an averted cheek; but the movements of the lily-like fingers attracted his attention: they were working restlessly and unconsciously, like those of one in the delirium of fever—plucking to pieces the flowers that had been dropped into the lap: already the ground was strewn with the costly petals.

“Do you see what you are doing?” Mr. Hilhouse asked, in a softened tone, well knowing that she did not see. “Don’t you sometimes incline to believe that every live flower has a sort of soul and sense—something to be hurt and to suffer when the flower is torn limb from limb thus?”

Esterel looked round at him; then she looked at the scattered and mutilated blossoms, then at the tiny tips of her fingers, dyed with the juices of the flowers.

“If I did believe that I should feel as if my hands were stained with blood,” she said, with a shudder. “Is there none on yours?”

“Why should there be? I did not aid you in your barbarous work,” he answered her, jestingly; but a sudden cold crept over him as he let her look at his hands.

“No, but I, too, have a sort of soul and sense, I suppose.” She spoke just as softly and humbly as before. “Your words, perhaps, were as cruel as my fingers. I wish I could amend my fault and make these flowers whole again. I will do what I can: the wind shall not blow them farther asunder.” Kneeling on the stone, she began to pick up the scattered

petals. Of course he had to help her, and, in truth, he was glad to do so;—how to understand her manner, how to answer her words, he hardly knew.

“I will amend my other fault, too,” Esterel said, when she had collected all the leaves and gathered them into her handkerchief,—“as far as I can, I mean. I will go to Marian and beg her pardon for having pained her, and ask her to come to me again.”

“I, too, then, must strive to amend my fault. Forgive my unwarrantable interference, my unpardonable plainness of speech.” That was all the apology he offered in words, though his changed manner offered more. But he did not feel ashamed of his own harsh rudeness, nor did he feel touched by the half wild pathos of Esterel’s look and tone so keenly as he would have done had he not been thinking of another matter. It would not suit his plans, nor accord with any of his wishes for her, that Marian should be at the Hall again, day after day, on the former footing: nor, indeed, on any footing. Yet he did not doubt that Luke Fay would be wrought upon by his wife to permit this if Esterel expressed a wish that it should be so; for Mr. Hilhouse knew with what sort of feeling—half of pity, half of reverence—the kind mother regarded the motherless “young lady up at the Hall.” How to prevent the renewal of the former intercourse was the problem that occupied Mr. Hilhouse. Esterel seemed soft as wax to his hand: the only difficulty was to effect his purpose and not give her fresh pain. He knew he was shutting Marian off from much pleasure if he shut her off from Esterel; but he thought he could give Marian more than he took from her. Very selfish, very—many other things not grand nor beautiful—was this man whom two women revered. With what he was, they, of course, had nothing to do, only with what they believed him to be.

“If I may venture to advise—may I?” he paused.

“You are more timid of giving advice than of giving pain, it seems,” she said, with the faintest smile. “Why

should you be afraid of doing either? Pray say anything you please."

"I think, then, that the old intercourse, the close and constant intimacy between you and your little friend having been broken off—first by your absence, then by hers—had better not be resumed."

"Will you give me a reason?" Esterel asked, after a pause.

"Marian's wound has healed over, or soon will do"—he thought he knew a successful salve. "It would be a pity that the chance of inflicting a fresh one should be run."

"May not things be as they have been without that danger?"

"It is not in the nature of the circumstances, nor of the persons concerned, that they should be."

"You mean because of my fault; because I am fickle and forgetful."

"You are, I think, impulsive and—if I may venture to say it—dreamy; so little alive to the actual life going on round you, that you will give pain where you are far from intending to do so: by omissions rather than by actions."

"Beyond this danger of new pain for Marian, have you any reason to give?"

"Yes. Her father has set himself against the intercourse; it has become a subject of contention: its being resumed would cause your little friend daily difficulties, daily struggles, and perplexities."

"Beyond this?"

"I have nothing more to say on the matter!" Mr. Hilhouse answered, impatiently: he did not understand, and he did not like this calm questioning. Calm? Yes, Esterel's face, he thought, looked stony calm. "Of course you will use your own discretion. I apologize for having interfered in a business that you think, I can see, is no business of mine." He drew out his watch, looked at it, and said, "All this time I have not given you Rosa's note. Will you kindly

read it now, and tell me if it needs an answer? for it is time I was on my way to the Castle."

Esterel took the note from his hand and opened it; after looking at it a few minutes, she said,—

"I cannot read it. Will *you* see if it wants an answer? I am sorry to trouble you, but I have one of my headaches come on. I cannot distinguish the words."

He looked at her; after that look he doubted the genuineness of the pain, as little as she suspected its origin: all her features seemed sharpened, and her eyes burned restlessly within dark circles. Beginning to read the note aloud, very careless of anything but getting through it, he suddenly found himself in the midst of a sentence in which his willing Mercuryship was significantly commented upon by his fair and foolish cousin. He paused and bit his lip.

"I will make Lady Winstay ashamed of her imprudent impertinences!" he muttered, threateningly. "It needs no answer!" he said, briefly, having looked it through to the end. Instead of giving it to Esterel, he crumpled it up and put it into his pocket. Esterel, he saw, was suffering too much to have heard what he read, or to heed what he did.

"Let me see you to the house, and give you into somebody's care before I go," he spoke compassionately. She had risen, smiling a sort of blind smile, dropping her shawl while gathering into her hand the wrecks of her nosegay. He picked up the shawl, put it round her, and drew her disengaged hand through his arm. Was it only then, for the first time, that a definite fear struck him?

"I am afraid your pain is acute," he said; "I think you must have got a slight sun-stroke. You must not again venture into this hot garden with your head unprotected. I have no doubt it is that has brought on your headache."

He led her into the first room he came to, and she let herself sink down upon the sofa to which he took her. She had a secret fear on her: if she spoke, if she once parted her compressed lips, she felt as if some mad words of self-betrayal

must escape her ; so she answered nothing to anything he said. He drew down all the blinds, trying to darken the room ; it would soon be dark enough, but now the last sunbeams were slanting in dazzlingly at the side of the oriel window.

When he had done that he came to look at her, bending down over the sofa where she lay quite motionless.

"Is the pain less now you are still ?" he asked. She looked up at him : in the dim green light her eyes shone with a golden glitter ; but she gave him no answer, and she did not look as if she understood him.

"What can I do for you ? Whom shall I call ?" he asked. "Pray let me do something."

Still no answer. He ventured to place his fingers lightly on her forehead, to see if it burnt with fever. He found the white brow hot as fire ; she moaned, and her eyes closed beneath his touch : he took her hand, it had the clayed coldness and wore the waxen look of a dead hand ; like a dead hand it fell from his when his hold of it relaxed.

Much alarmed, Mr. Hilhouse opened the door into the hall in search of assistance ; fortunately the first person he saw was Esterel's maid, retreating in the distance. She came, at his hasty summons, but with no gracious face.

"Is your mistress often ill in this way ?" he asked. "She said she had one of her headaches. It came on suddenly. The heat I found her in was enough to give her a sun-stroke. Why do you not take more care of her than to let her go out with her head unprotected ?"

"It's not everybody my mistress will be taken care of by," the maid answered pertly. "Indeed, I don't know what to do ; and Mr. Downside *will* be in a taking !" she continued. "I've not been here long, you see, sir, and don't know much about my lady. She's not like other ladies I've served ! I never knew another to treat a cottage-girl as if she were a sister, and to treat her own maid like nobody at all !"

"When is Mr. Downside expected home ?" Mr. Hilhouse asked, impatiently.

"There's no knowing: people say he rides all through the night sometimes, coming in and out through the great window near the room where the light is so often burning. Funny doings there are in this house, if all was known!"

"Can't you do anything for your mistress, instead of standing to gossip? Bathe her temples with cold water, if you don't do anything else. I will send a doctor round: that can do no harm. Does the Bramblebridge doctor ever attend Miss Downside?"

"I believe so," the maid answered, sullenly.

What better to do than to leave the suffering girl in these incapable and unwilling hands, while he himself, as quickly as possible, went to summon the doctor, Mr. Hilhouse did not know. He thought for a moment of sending for Marian; but then the possibility that Esterel might be sickening with some infectious fever occurred to him, causing him to dismiss that idea. Borrowing a horse from Mr. Downside's stable, he rode full speed towards the village.

As he left the doctor's house, having his promise to be at the Hall immediately, he met Mr. Downside going homewards. Knowing, therefore, that he could be of no further use, he determined to return to Southsand, telling Mr. Downside that he would ride the horse he had borrowed back next morning, and should then hope to hear favourable tidings of Miss Downside. For once taking a road through the woods that did not pass the gamekeeper's cottage, he galloped back to the Castle.



CHAPTER XV.

COMMENT.

ESTEREL'S illness saved Lady Winstay from the severe reproof that had been in store for her, to which the crumpled note in her cousin's pocket was to have served as condemnatory text.

Her ladyship had already gone to her room for the night, when Mr. Hilhouse returned to the Castle. Lady Winstay was a friend to early hours, especially when there were no other guests at the house, and "even Herbert" was unavailable. Early hours were good for the complexion, helping to keep up that fresh bloom for which she was admired, and they shortened the evenings; which, when her lord was her only companion, the fair lady was apt to find long at the shortest; not that Lord Winstay was generally considered dull or a bore; far from it; he was a man of cultivation, refinement, and strong good sense; perhaps the only foolish thing he had done in his life, he did when he fell in love with his present lady: but on the rare occasions when he found himself *tête-à-tête* with his wife for the evening, he was apt to try his hand at "improving Lady Winstay's mind" by reading to her, from *The Times*, or some note-worthy article in his favourite Quarterly, and endeavouring to make her take an interest in those public affairs which were his chief interest in life.

"To improve my mind you will find impossible, my lord," her frivolous ladyship sometimes assured him; "for I am quite certain I have no mind to be improved. That you should think I stand in need of any improvement, is what I should not *once* have expected of you; but husbands and lovers are different beings, as every married woman has to learn."

"Poor Mr. Downside!" her ladyship commented, on hearing her cousin's reason for having been so late the night before, given to Lord Winstay, as she poured out the coffee in the breakfast-room of that Castle by the sea—a breakfast-room opening on to a terrace against the base of whose solid wall the water always washed at high tide; while in stormy weather it sometimes leapt to its very summit.

Mr. Hilhouse's reason was so briefly given, and he looked "so much of an ogre" this morning, that Lady Winstay abstained from any bantering comment on a lover's exaggerating anxiety; though it was difficult to leave unuttered the light words that were ready to her tongue—the more difficult,

as it was so little her ladyship's custom to restrain her tongue. It was, perhaps, this custom of hers of free and thoughtless speaking that had gained for Lady Winstay such varying suffrages; some men finding her nonsense amusing and prizing the chance sparks of random wit, while by others she was condemned as "almost a fool, yet mischievous withal!"

"Poor Mr. Downside!" she repeated; "if Esterel's finger aches he is thrown almost into a fever. One of her headaches used to cause him an agony that must have been beyond anything she could have suffered; though I suppose they are very bad: I never saw her in one of them: she used to shut herself up when they came on. Esterel's illnesses are always kept so mysterious; though I daresay, if the truth were known, they are much like other people's. But Mr. Downside puts himself into such an unreasonable state of alarm directly anything is the least amiss with her. If anybody made such a fuss about me, it would frighten me to death! Will you have some more cream in your coffee, Herbert? No doubt you are in a hurry to be off."

"Miss Downside is subject to severe headaches, then?" asked Lord Winstay. "I have heard it whispered that her mother was melancholy-mad before she died. Miss Downside, though so gentle and beautiful, and so very charming, sometimes gives me an eerie feeling: she is undoubtedly what people call odd in her look and in her ways at times."

"Odd!" echoed Lady Winstay, frowning significantly at her husband, while Mr. Hilhouse bent over his letters. "Esterel is not a bit odd! I should think, Lord Winstay, that I know her a great deal better than you do, and I say she is not a bit odd. But if she were, it would be no wonder, poor, dear girl. As to her mother having been mad—melancholy-mad or laughing-mad—that's an absurd, trumped-up story, originating in some confusion between the two wives. Only think of one poor man having two mad wives! that is rather too bad to be true."

"It certainly seems so," Lord Winstay agreed, as he cut open *The Times*.

"As to Esterel's being odd, I often wonder she isn't: no society, no change, no life, mere vegetation. I should go mad if I led her life for six months. What with the stories about the Hall, of ghosts, and murders, and suicides; what with having no one for a companion, but that mild and melancholy step-father, with the ghost-seeing look in his eyes; what with the shut-up rooms of the dead wives, and their pictures and their perfumes; what with lights burning all night, and the oratory, and the secret entrance, and the bell tower, where a bell rings when no one rings it, and the clock built into the wall in the hall, that strikes now and then, though it never can be wound up: what with one thing and another, I would not live at Bramblebridge Hall for —— not for anything."

"Mr. Downside did not ask you to remain permanently at the Hall before Lord Winstay had appropriated you for the Castle, I suppose!" Mr. Hilhouse remarked, looking up when at last Lady Winstay had brought her harangue to a close.

"Did you hear that, Lord Winstay? Herbert, you are too impertinent!"

"What is it, my dear Rosa? I beg your pardon, I was merely glancing through a most interesting article," Lord Winstay said, apologetically.

Breakfast was over; her ladyship rose with an air of offended dignity, stepped on to the terrace, went to its very edge where Lord Winstay could not bear to see her stand, and began pushing pebbles into the water with the tip of her prettily-shod little foot. To her surprise she was not followed, nor recalled, though she balanced herself on the very edge of the sea-wall, and the wind blew her ample skirts beyond it;—glancing over her shoulder, she saw that her lord and her cousin were conversing with their backs turned to the window. It was no use to put herself into a dangerous position if it alarmed no one: she had no fancy for doing so if no one were

ready to come to the rescue ; so she re-entered the house by another way, and went up to her own room, her pet room, with one balconied window overhanging the sea, and another looking over the common towards the Bramblebridge woods. From this last window, she, by-and-by, watched her cousin riding towards Bramblebridge ; as from that window she had often watched him do before.

It happened that Mr. Hilhouse met with Mr. Downside and the doctor outside the Hall : they were taking a turn on the south terrace ; Mr. Downside was looking harassed and anxious, but both he and the doctor made light of Esterel's indisposition.

"I expected a case of brain-fever from your account last night," Dr. Bridgend said. "I found no symptoms of the kind, I am happy to say. Acute pain, no doubt, a slight touch of congestion, probably. As you said, the exposure of the brain to the heat of the sun might account for a sudden and curious attack." Here the doctor, a shrewd, shrivelled little man, with restless eyes that seemed ever on the hunt to find out everything, and on the watch to let out nothing, looked penetratingly at Mr. Hilhouse.

"Miss Downside," he continued, "I have known from a child. She is made of finest egg-shell china in lieu of common clay, as it were. Hers is an exquisitely delicate organization. The subtle relation between mind and body is closer and more intimate than usual in her case. The nervous system is always highly strung, the slightest shock may cause a vibration not short of agony. I have always said that excitement of a painful nature should be sedulously warded off: I say so again. In this instance, no doubt, the shock was to the physical system ; still, the same symptoms might result from any mental shock. Have you the slightest reason to suppose she had sustained any ? Could anything have occurred likely to cause her pain ?" The acute eyes rested a moment on Mr. Hilhouse, though the question was asked of Mr. Downside. Quite frankly and unsuspectingly, Mr. Downside answered,—

"Not the slightest reason; indeed, I do not think it possible."

"Well, well, a little rest, perfect quiet for a few days," this was said very emphatically, "will bring my patient round."

Though the little doctor made light of Esterel's illness, Mr. Hilhouse discovered incidentally that he had watched in her room all night.

Mr. Hilhouse rode over to the Hall several following days. Each day he received a more favourable bulletin; yet when Lady Winstay drove over expressly to see Esterel, perfect quiet was still so much insisted on that, in spite of considerable importunity on her ladyship's part, she was denied an interview. At this, she chose to take offence, and said it should be long before she visited the Hall again.

When Esterel's health was re-established, and she would have seen him had he come, Mr. Hilhouse had left off coming; though Lady Winstay, knowing that he still went to Bramble-bridge frequently, believed that he was still a frequent visitor at the Hall.



CHAPTER XVI.

TO DOUBT.

"What is the news from the Castle? Has Lady Winstay recovered her temper yet?" Mr. Downside asked his daughter, as they sat together after dinner one evening.

"What was Rosa out of temper about?"

"I thought you knew, my love. Her chatter was the worst thing possible for a nervous patient; so when you were unwell the other day, I would not let her see you. I told you this, my dear."

"I do not remember. Why do you ask me about news from the Castle? I have seen no one from Southsand."

"I met Mr. Hilhouse in the neighbourhood; I thought you had seen him, perhaps."

"He has not been here." As Esterel said those words, in a tone as if she spoke out of a weary dream, it seemed to her as if she had been saying just those words day after day, year after year for a lifetime—for more than a lifetime. "He has not been here," she repeated in a lower voice, and the words echoed on and on, lower, softer, dying away only to sound afresh.

Mr. Downside had looked up quickly when she said the words aloud the second time: perhaps he was struck by something in their tone; but Esterel's lashes lay stirless on her white cheek: she appeared to be wholly occupied with the strawberries upon her plate; her downcast face told nothing, or, at least, nothing new.

"If Mr. Hilhouse did not come here, then, no doubt, he was going to Deerhurst: it was before the turn in the road that I met him."

"No doubt he was going to Deerhurst," Esterel agreed.

Then she tried to remember something; what was it? Oh, some words of Lady Winstay's, unheeded at the time, about "the pretty Miss Curzons, of Deerhurst." She had no definite jealousy, but, at her heart, there was a feeling, not of vague pain and uneasiness, but as if a sharp-toothed animal were tearing and rending it: she pressed her hand there sometimes, as if she thought her hurt was physical and outward.

"By-the-by, though, now I think of it," said Mr. Downside, thoughtfully, "he was not going to Deerhurst; for I remember I turned to look after him, and saw him strike into the path that leads to the Hall, past the gamekeeper's cottage. It is strange that he did not come here when so close, as he was not going to Deerhurst—which he certainly was not."

Had Mr. Downside glanced across the table then, he might have been startled by a sudden change on Esterel's face; but he was gazing towards the window dreamily. That expression

passed away unremarked, but not without leaving a trace. Presently, when Mr. Downside fell asleep in his chair, Esterel rose and escaped to her own room.

"It must be true!" she said, as she locked the door behind her. "I would not, I dared not believe it, and it must be true!"

She sank down among the cushions of a couch standing in the window: resting her chin upon her hand she sat looking out. Her face growing hard and stern, her eyes shining with a cold, cruel glitter, she sat looking out: after the daylight was gone, after the sunset glow had faded off the woods, after the twilight and the sea mist which had settled down upon them together had given place to the darkness of a moonless and cloudy summer night, long after she could see nothing, she sat in the dark looking into darkness. Once she was interrupted by a message from Mr. Downside, to know if she were coming down again that night. She sent word no, but that she was quite well: he need not be uneasy. She told her maid who brought the message that she should not need her, but would undress herself when she wished to go to bed. This she often did; it was one of her "queer ways," as the maid said. After that she was not disturbed.

In spite of her soft dreaminess of manner, Esterel was not one to wait in patience, passively, for time and circumstances to read the riddle the answer to which she thought to be life or death. The waters of bitterness were seething and swelling higher and higher; she could not resolve to sit still and listen to the boiling noise, and watch the curling eddies: she must do something or be driven mad.

When at dawn Esterel undressed and lay down upon her bed, she had resolved to *know*, that day, whether indeed the gamekeeper's daughter—her humble little friend, her petted pupil, pretty Marian Fay—were her rival. And afterwards, if she gained the knowledge that this was so?—She tried to think of that, but could not yet: her brain seemed to refuse to obey her will.

The morning favoured Esterel's design, for Mr. Downside rode out directly after breakfast. She gained the oratory unobserved, locked herself in, and climbed the secret winding stair which led from it to the bell-tower. Over the great bell, in the roof of the dome, there was a tiny chamber, just high enough for a man to stand upright, meant for an observatory, and containing, besides the astronomical glass, a powerful telescope for the view. To this chamber Esterel ascended. With difficulty she managed to shift the telescope so as to command the part of the common nearest to the Castle, and then she had to clear and adjust the long unused glasses before she could see anything. That done, however, she did not watch in vain. She soon saw somebody riding across the common towards the wood from the direction of the Castle. After that she watched an hour, now and then getting a glimpse of the figure, then losing it again. This horseman did not take the Deerhurst road, but continued in that leading to Bramblebridge: having assured herself of this, it was no use to watch there any longer, for the horseman was swallowed up by the wood now. If he were coming to the Hall, it would certainly be within another hour.

Blinded and giddy from that long watch, Esterel cautiously descended the steep stair; on her way she entered the belfry itself for a moment. Looking over the low parapet which guarded the open front, down on the terrace so far below, she thought of a story she had heard when a child, of a priest who had rung his own requiem there—had swung himself over that parapet, loosed the rope and been dashed to death on the pavement below. Esterel shuddered.

"Not that way!" she said; but she realized with a wild thrill the frenzy of mingled despair and exultation with which the man must have taken his death-leap.

After one long look over the glorious prospect of sea and land—one long look from where, perhaps, that man had taken his last look—Esterel continued her descent, clinging with both hands to the rugged wall. From the oratory she passed

into her mother's rooms. This morning, as often, she found that Mr. Downsidé had been there before her, knew this by the fresh flowers—flowers such as she had gathered for the same purpose on that last day when she had seen *him*—which filled the costly vases in the inner room.

Esterel knelt down before the picture of her mother. Now, lifting clasped hands towards the unchangeable face, she gave her passion way: like the burning lava forced upwards from a volcano, were the fervid words, forced up from the white heat of that passion which escaped from her lips: words neither of prayer nor of any kind of worship: mere words of half-delirious self-confession and self-accusation. After a time she rose and went downstairs to the room that he would be shown into when he came—if he came, she would not say.

The casements were open wide; from one window she could see the blue smoke ascending from the wood, marking the spot on which stood the gamekeeper's cottage. She seated herself in that window to watch and to listen. It was sultry noon now when she began to watch, and there was the stillness of sultry noon over everything. That smoke, as it went wavering up through the glimmering air, seemed to be the only thing that stirred.

She listened till the ringing and singing in her own head bewildered her, and she watched till she seemed to waver with the wavering heat that was over everything; but she neither heard nor saw anything.

It was two hours past noon when she moved. Her garden hat and the Indian shawl were close at hand; she put them on, in trembling haste now, though she had sat stirless so long. Opening the room-door, she looked down the gallery before she went out into it; no one was there: perfect stillness reigned in the house. The hall-door stood open because of the heat, and quite noiselessly she gained the terrace; then she descended at once to the lower walks, where she was safe from observation. Now she laughed at her own stealthi-

ness, saying—"secret as Lady Macbeth bent on midnight murder."

There was a walk, narrow, damp, and black with the impenetrable shadows of clipped yews which over-arched—a walk that Esterel usually shunned, however hot the weather—which led to a neglected part of the shrubbery, where tangled laurels and wildly grown rhododendrons formed the underwood to some large forest-trees that had been spared for their peculiar beauty as seen from the house. This walk Esterel took to-day. Gaining the wood, from this dark dismal part of the grounds, she made her way towards the cottage; avoiding all the paths where she might have met strawberry-gathering children from the village, or any of the wood-keepers.



CHAPTER XVII.

TO BE RESOLVED.

THE rider whom Esterel had watched, stopped and dismounted, of course, at the gamekeeper's cottage.

There was no face at the window, and no one was in the garden, so fastening his horse's bridle to the paling, Mr. Hilhouse went up the path to the cottage-door. The door was shut: he knocked softly twice; at his second knock, Marian came, but with a face pale and tear-stained that was not like her face; a face, too, that did not brighten when she saw who it was had knocked.

"Am I not to come in?" he asked, laughingly, for Marian did not open the door wide.

"Of course, sir, if you please; but my father and mother are not at home," she answered, gravely.

"They will be soon, I suppose? Meanwhile I will wait and talk to you—if I may."

She led the way into her little parlour, and set a chair for

him near the window. Instead of seating himself, he took her by the hand and led her to the chair, making her sit down, while he stood beside her ; still, for a moment or two, holding her hand.

“Marian ! you are not afraid of me ? ” he asked.

For answer she smiled one of her old smiles, straight into his eyes ; but it faded sooner than her smiles used to fade, and left her face graver than they used to leave it.

“Why does this little hand tremble so, then ? ” he asked, as he released it.

She looked down upon her hand, and made him no answer : she was greatly troubled and confused.

“Something is amiss : I must know what. Marian, you can do me a great service,” he added, after a pause.

At that she looked up in bright expectation, as he had expected she would.

“What is it, sir ? ”

She need not have asked that question with her lips, her whole face had asked it.

“I will tell you presently ; but, first, you must tell me what troubles you.”

“Must I ? I do not know if it is right.”

“It is right ; I will explain to you, presently, why it is right : now tell me.” He stood leaning against the window-frame, and looking down upon her.

“My father says I must go away—that he shall take me away to-morrow : he has been angry with mother for wanting him to let me stay.”

“Why is this ? Come, my child, you must tell me all, or perhaps I shall keep my secret about what it is you can do for me.”

“It is because—because you come here so often, sir. I think some one must have been speaking against you to father.”

“Is this all ? Never mind ; perhaps, I can mend this mischief : if you let me try, I am sure I can. Meanwhile, let

all the world speak against me, if you do not believe what the world says : would you believe it, Marian ? ”

“ I could not, sir,” she said, with an unconscious clasping of the hands, and a candid upward glance.

“ Bless you, dear child ! ” he muttered, softly. “ Now, Marian, I want to tell you the secret of what you can do for me,” he began. Then he paused, his voice was not quite clear nor firm. Marian’s eyes fell before his, though she had lifted them up full of hopeful, wondering eagerness.

“ I want you, Marian,” he went on to say, “ to give me the right to share all your troubles, small and great. I want you, you yourself, Marian, to be all and wholly mine—I want you to be my wife.”

“ I, your wife, sir ! Marian Fay your wife ! Oh, sir, you cannot be in earnest, and you should not jest in that way ! ” Marian answered, flushing and shaking like a leaf.

“ I am in deep, passionate earnest, Marian : never in my life have I been more in earnest. All my hopes and all my happiness lie at your feet.”

“ Do not say that, sir ; it cannot, it must not be true. I cannot do as you ask me. Marian Fay your wife ! Do you not see, sir, that it cannot be ? ”

“ And why not, Marian ? Because you cannot love me ? ”

“ If I did, sir, I could not be your wife. Your wife must be a lady, sir, and I am not a lady. Your wife ought to be rich, and beautiful, and clever, like Miss Esterel, not a poor cottage girl like me.”

“ Cannot you love me, Marian ? Answer me only this.”

He bent down to look into her face. A shivering, shuddering sort of sigh came from Marian’s lips, then a faint smile flickered over them—a pale, sad smile. She would not meet his look ; she gently shook her head, and said,—

“ I cannot marry you, sir. I am not fit to be your wife. It is very, very good of you to wish it, but ——”

“ Not good at all,” he interrupted. “ I am quite selfish : seeking my own good. Believe me, Marian, that I know best

what kind of wife will make me happiest. My wife shall be like Marian Fay, or I will have no wife at all. Once more, I ask you. Cannot you love me? I am older, by many years, than your husband should, perhaps, be; I am grave and dull, perhaps; but I love you well, and I would cherish you well. Now, tell me, child, once for all, cannot you love me?"

He was getting vexed and his tone growing peremptory.

"Oh, sir! I think I love you dearly. I should like to be near you always; I should like to be your servant always, but not your wife—I should be afraid to be your wife."

"You do love me, Marian! You have said it. I take you now, and I will hold you."

As he spoke he took her in his arms. She gave a little gasp, a little quivering cry, half joy, half fear; then her head rested on his breast quietly—only a short moment, soon she gently disengaged herself.

She looked through the bowery casement into the summer day, and asked, "Is this real?"

"It is a Midsummer Day's Dream," Mr. Hilhouse answered, fondly. "Never mind how the scene changes if all its changes find us together. My dear one, my lovely one, my timid little wood-pigeon," he said, smoothing, with caressing touches, the pretty hair he had disordered, "you must leave off trembling and put all your fears away: sweetest, believe me I will strive to make you happy. You need not be afraid to be my wife."

"It is not that," said Marian, whose tears began to fall thick and fast. "But I know I shall not make you happy; I know I shall not be such a wife as you should have. Oh, sir, think better of it, and let father take me away to-morrow. I am not ungrateful, though I cry," she added. "Don't think that I am ungrateful: if I didn't cry, I think my heart would break. It seems more than I can bear."

Before he knew what she was going to do, she was kneeling before him, kissing his hand. "All my life, if I live to be very old, will be too short to thank you in," she said; "but I can-

not see what is right—I give you no promise. I wish my mother would come.”

He lifted her up from the ground, kissed her forehead and her hair, soothed her as he would have soothed a child, and she clung to him as a child might have clung: yet it was no childish trouble nor fear that was swelling in her innocent breast.

When he released her, she would not sit down again. She moved about the room restlessly; now looking from the window to see if her mother were yet in sight, now going to the table, taking up her work only to put it down again, moving her books and her flowers just to replace them in their former positions. He followed her to the table. Attempting to put her at her ease he began to speak of indifferent things, admiring the muslin which she was making into a dress, and praising her cleverness in being able to make it herself. He had succeeded in bringing the smiles back to her face, when he spoilt all by saying,—

“Such a clever-fingered little maiden is far more fit than a fine lady to be the wife of a man as poor as I am.”

Marian’s eyes filled again. It was with an accent of relief that she exclaimed, as she heard the latch of the garden-gate lifted,—

“Here is my mother, at last ! ”

It was true that she loved her lover dearly; more dearly and deeply than she yet knew. True that she revered him far beyond his merit, and believed him noble up to an even heroic standard of nobility; yet in her heart there was fear and trouble, more than hope and happiness. Fear of being tempted to wrong; trouble the cause of which was vague and secret, and buried so deep in her heart that to herself she had hardly yet acknowledged it, though she felt that it was connected with her dear mistress, as she still called Esterel. It seemed to Marian that it was hard to breathe, through the sultriness of the air, and that her heart beat too loud and fast.

Marian opened the door for her mother. Putting her arms

round her neck, and kissing her, she told her some one was waiting in the parlour to speak to her. She saw that her father was only pausing at the gate to try and repair the mischief her lover's impatient horse had done by pulling at the paling; she saw, too, that he looked stern and frowning. She did not want to be spoken to *then*, she did not feel as if she could bear it; so she ran round the garden to the open glade at the back of the cottage, and hid herself behind the trunk of one of the gigantic firs.

From the cottage she was effectually hidden there, but not from any one approaching the cottage from the part of the wood about the Pool.

Seating herself upon the roots of the tree, leaning her head against the rough bark and clasping her hands over her knee, Marian tried to understand this mystery of mysteries; to realize what had come to her. She tried, too, to pray; to pray especially for guidance: tried to lay all her new hopes, fears, happiness and trouble before her Father in heaven.

Poor child! she was too bewildered to be able to feel that she lifted her heart above the earth.

What would her mother think? What would her father say? These were questions she naturally asked herself.

By-and-by—she seemed to have been there a long time, but if it had really been a long time or short she could not tell—by-and-by she heard her mother calling her, and when she went out from her hiding-place on to the open sward, there stood her mother with a girlish bloom on her cheek and dewy happiness glistening in her eyes, and beside her mother stood her lover with a look of glad triumph on his face.

Mr. Hilhouse had fought a battle, and had won it. Luke Fay met his guest in no tractable mood. Even when Mr. Hilhouse had explained his fair and honourable intentions, no easy task remained to him; perhaps, but for the mother's help, he would not have succeeded in overcoming the gamekeeper's bristling independence, his dislike to have his daughter "made a lady of," and so lifted out of his own sphere.

Mr. Hilhouse was patient : he told over the story of his life, in order to prove to Luke that his station and Marian's were not as different as might be imagined. His parents had been humble people, in no respect much better off than the gamekeeper ; but, born in a town, educated at a good free school, and being naturally ambitious, he had " raised himself " by laborious application to a position where all things had seemed possible : then, unhappily, he had thrown away fair chances, and having met with a disappointment that had unsettled him, earned the reputation of a ne'er-do-well—a reputation he had now, however, long lived down.

To all he said Luke Fay listened stolidly, then he replied,—

" For all this you are not going to deny that you are a gentleman, now ; and I do deny that my daughter is a lady."

" Then, sir, you do your daughter great wrong. If you call me a gentleman, you do not use the word as signifying a man, what people call, well-born : it is only in this common sense that Marian is not a lady. In all true gentleness—"

" I know, I know," Luke interrupted, proudly. " My girl is gentler and prettier in her ways than many a born lady, and true and honest besides ; which by all accounts, some of your fine ladies are not. All the more I can't bear to see my girl set in a place where she'll be looked down upon. My lady at the Castle now, sir—your cousin, as I hear—what will she say to this choice of yours ? "

" My cousin will not dare to look down upon my wife, or to say anything against my choice. Be reasonable, good Mr. Fay ; tell me what is it in Marian can give any one an excuse for looking down upon her ? "

" She's not a lady : with that it begins, and with that it ends. If you put her among ladies, they'll find that out ; they have ways that she hasn't, and no doubt she has ways that they haven't. If you put her among town ladies, she'll be no more at home than——"

"Than a wood primrose in a hothouse. That is true. You love your daughter, and you are careful for her; but, Mr. Fay, I love your daughter, too, with a lover's love and a husband's love. Is not this more than a father's love? Did you not make her mother believe so? Can you not trust to me to care for her? and not to place my fresh little flower where it would soon fade and wither?"

"Oh, Luke, you can trust this gentleman; he will take care for Marian: I feel he will! Haven't you been more to me than father or mother, or brother or sister; he'll be so to her, for I know he loves her, or why should he seek her? He can't want her for anything but because he loves her."

Mr. Hilhouse pressed the pleading mother's hand gratefully.

"Wife's against me, so of course I'll have to give in! But, somehow, it goes heavy against my heart—heavy against my heart!" Luke repeated. "It must be more than the losing of our girl that weighs there." Looking hard into the lover's face, Luke once more turned the matter over in his mind. Then, speaking abruptly to his anxious wife, he asked,—

"Wife! Thou think'st our maid loves this gentleman?"

"In her innocent way I think she has loved him longer and better than she knows."

"As you loved me, wife?"

"As I loved you, Luke."

"No use to say more than 'God bless them,' then." Luke reached out his hand to his future son-in-law, saying, solemnly, as it was firmly grasped, "May God so deal with you as you deal with our child, our one ewe-lamb that you take to your bosom."

"Amen!" answered Mr. Hilhouse. It was, after all, he thought, with half remorseful tenderness, a cruel sacrifice he was demanding of these parents.

Luke Fay rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes;

without another word he marched into the kitchen, reached down his pipe and his tobacco-box, and began to smoke.

It was then that the mother and the lover went out to look for Marian.

In her mother's glad face, and in her close clasp and fervent blessing, Marian learnt that her father had consented to what her lover asked.

Then Mr. Hilhouse drew her to him, announcing, triumphantly, "You are mine, Marian; they have given you to me."

"I must go back to poor father," Mrs. Fay said, and left them together.

There, under the shadow of the pines, in sight of the gloomy cypresses that hid the pool, Mr. Hilhouse took his first lover's farewell of Marian.

"What now, you frightened little thing?" he asked as he felt her start.

"Nothing, nothing; only a fancy of mine. I thought, I thought—" her voice sank to a whisper, "that I saw a white face look out from among those bushes. It was only a moment's fancy—I see nothing, now."

"Ghost-seeing in the golden daylight, Marian! Shall I beat the bush for you, and give chase to the ghost?"

"Oh, no; oh, no!"

Her last words to him—he thought they were only spoken out of innocent coquetry, or from a lingering of that doubt and fear which he had tried so hard to banish—were:

"You will always know that I was not ungrateful? That I love you, oh, so dearly! But I have given you no promise. Remember that I have given you no promise!"

Some instinct which she could not have explained, made her say this.

"I will remember it, little one," he said, as he drew a ring off his finger to place on hers. "I will torment you no more to-day; but to-morrow!—I will not leave you to-morrow till I have your promise."

He answered her gaily, and a few moments afterwards he was gone—"till to-morrow," as he said, the last thing.

Marian lingered alone where he had left her.

"To-morrow!" she echoed. "I love him—oh, how I love him!" she breathed out.

She listened till she could no longer hear his horse's hoofs, then went in to get tea ready for her father and mother. When she entered the kitchen her father put down his pipe, and called her to him; he gave her his solemn blessing. When she had turned away, as he put his pipe between his lips again, he muttered,—

"I'd rather it had been young Jacob. I'd far rather it had been young Jacob."

"Poor Jacob!" echoed the happy mother; but very softly: she did not wish to trouble Marian's joy by reminding her of "poor Jacob's" misery.



CHAPTER XVIII.

AN EXPLANATION

THROUGH the golden afternoon Mr. Hilhouse rode towards the Castle, dreaming, as he rode, sweet and pleasant dreams. Pondering over Marian's goodness, her humility, her simplicity, her gentleness—and just such qualities as these were peculiarly gracious to him—with a full heart, he planned for himself an altered life, a life of more earnest work to higher ends. His lovely, lowly, and loving child-wife was to make his home a haven of refuge from the sin, soil, and toil of the world—a heaven of peace, purity, and love. This, and far more, she was to do for him. In return? Well, he would love her as no woman had been loved; cherish her as no woman had been cherished: so he schemed and dreamed, riding through the golden afternoon.

Is it not often the case that what we take to be but a beginning, a dawn of good things, proves to have been at once beginning and end ?

We fancy our joy is but in its bud, and find that bud was all the blossoming appointed for us to know ; or that if the bud opens to a flower, it is but to disclose the canker at its heart.

We sip from the brim of a full goblet, and believe we shall at our leisure drain it to the dregs ; meanwhile, a shadowy hand approaches, destined to dash the cup aside, as we pause upon its sweetness ; or, a far harder fate, we drink out the wine, and taste the very gall of bitterness.

Afterwards, we "wish we had known." We would have given ourselves more to the present, had we not been looking so much to that future of which we find ourselves defrauded. So we say, not recognizing that all things always take their appointed course ; that nothing was other than it was to be ; that this existence is only the dawn to the day, the bud to the flower, the first sip of the goblet of life.

As it was low-water in Southsand Bay, Mr. Hilhouse struck across the sands, instead of keeping to the road. Lady Winstay was standing in the balcony, through idleness, watching for his return. Very pretty she *felt*, as the light sea-breeze fluttered her muslin flounces and her shining curls, and she waved to him with her hand. Riding right beneath her window he glanced up at her with a smile, which made her think, "Herbert looks quite handsome and amiable this afternoon !"

"Come up to me, now, do," she said, on the strength of that amiable expression. Leaning quite over the balustrade, she added, "I have been alone all day, and I really am heartily tired of myself. Come up and talk to me !"

"I will be with your ladyship shortly," he answered, with a mocking reverence, as he turned to ride round to the entrance.

Lady Winstay settled herself at her embroidery frame,

saying in her heart, "I must know all about it: surely the time is come."

When Mr. Hilhouse joined her, however, she asked no questions. His society did not seem likely to enliven her much, for when he had inquired where Lord Winstay was, why she had been alone all day, and had made a few very ordinary remarks, he took up his station in the window near which she sat, and remained silent.

This did not suit Lady Winstay, so she dropped her scissors on purpose that she might request him to pick them up for her. Instead of the scissors he handed her a paper-knife, which happened to be lying on the floor near them. At this Lady Winstay laughed outright, exclaiming,—

"Herbert! I am sure you are in love: I am quite sure of it; so you may as well confess."

"There can be no need to confess what you already are quite sure of, Rosa," he answered. Leaving the window he sat down close to his cousin. He had made up his mind that, for Marian's sake—perhaps, also, for other reasons—his engagement had better not remain a secret, from Lady Winstay especially; so he was glad of this opportunity of making a disclosure.

"Do not be provoking, Herbert! now tell me, am I not right?" She bent over her work, and her heart beat quicker than its calm wont as she listened for his answer.

"Not far wrong, perhaps, except in using a hateful, hackneyed, vulgar phrase."

"Never mind the phrase, the fact is all the same. Now tell me all about it. I will not triumph overmuch; though, indeed, I ought to have my revenge for all the sharp things you have said to me. But I really am too glad to be spiteful," she added, looking up with tears in her eyes. "Dear Herbert! you must drive me over this very evening to congratulate Esterel."

"Esterel!" Lady Winstay's handkerchief, lifted to her eyes, prevented her from seeing the expression of her cousin's

face ; but the tone made her remove her handkerchief, and quickly.

“ You are under a strange mistake, Rosa. Pray undeceive yourself as soon as possible.” Mr. Hilhouse spoke coldly, and gravely.

“ You do not mean to say that Esterel has refused you ! ”

“ I have not given her the opportunity ; nothing I have said or admitted has the slightest reference to that lady. Pray do not thus make free with her name.”

Lady Winstay’s cheek whitened : if her heart had beat too quickly before, it seemed to her to pause now.

“ You are not going to tell me that you are in love, and not with Esterel ! That you are going to be married, and not to Esterel ! ” she said, with a gasp.

“ I again tell you that nothing I have said or admitted has the slightest connection with that lady ; that she is in no way concerned in the matter.”

“ Do not make so sure of that, sir ! ” Lady Winstay exclaimed, angrily. After a pause she added, in a persuasive manner, “ You are only teasing me, Herbert ; own that you are only teasing me. If not with Esterel, you are not in love at all.”

“ At all events I am going to be married : certainly not to the lady whose name you persist in dragging into this discussion.”

Curiosity conquered other feelings in Lady Winstay’s mind for a while.

“ It is not either of the Miss Curzons, for you never go to Deerhurst Park. Herbert ! it cannot be the governess : she never can have been pretty ; and now she wears spectacles and is getting grey.”

“ The governess ” was governess to Lord Winstay’s children by a former marriage : which children were so carefully kept out of the way, that many visitors at the Castle were ignorant of their existence.

“ Prettiness is not a woman’s only attraction ! Miss Grey

is very talented: from the first I had a great respect for her!"

"You frighten me. *Do* tell me. Is it the governess? I don't believe it is. You are laughing at me. You would not do that—marry a governess."

"I would have done once; now I am going to do worse than that, you will consider."

"Good heavens! he is serious." Lady Winstay clasped her hands in genuine distress. "What have I done? What will become of her?" she exclaimed, and then hid her face in her hands.

"What do you mean? What do these tragic airs mean? No more of this child's play!"

"I wish it may prove child's play to her."

"To whom?"

"To Esterel, sir!"

"Pshaw! I am not coxcomb enough to imagine ——"

"Imagine what you please," broke in Lady Winstay, with flushed cheeks and angry eyes; "she loves you, sir, and she thinks that you love her! She has had cause to think so. I did not doubt it myself, and I helped to make her believe it. You did love her: it is your accursed pride of independence to which you sacrifice her. After having made her love you—love you passionately—you are going to marry some one else! her maid, perhaps, I should not wonder. What will become of her? What will become of her?"

Lady Winstay ended by a burst of tears.

Mr. Hilhouse had sprung up and was walking to and fro; by-and-by he paused before her and said,—

"Lady Winstay, you have acted foolishly and wickedly. Whether or no what you say about Miss Downside is true—and I trust it is wholly false—you have acted foolishly and wickedly. It is a pity the consequences cannot fall on your head only. How dared you act as you have done?"

"How dared *you* act as *you* have done? How dare you speak to me as you speak now? What else could your con-

duct mean than what I thought it meant? Hardly a day has passed that you have not ridden to the Hall. How could I imagine your taste could be so low as to lead you to court the maid instead of the mistress—which is, I suppose, what you have done.”

“Who says hardly a day has passed that I have not ridden to the Hall? Whoever says so, says what is utterly false!”

“I have seen you, sir, with my own eyes.”

“Watched! eh, my lady? Your eyes have deceived you. For some ten days past I have not been within a mile of the Hall.”

“Not within a mile of the Hall!” she paused upon those words, and turned them over in her mind. Then she cried, “Something dreadful will happen, I know! How can I ever look her in the face again? She is not one to take it quietly! Something dreadful will happen; I know it will.”

Again she had recourse to tears.

Mr. Hilhouse resumed his seat beside her.

“Rosa!” he said, sternly—“Rosa!” he repeated more gently and laid his hand upon her shoulder—“It is no use for either of us to be angry now—I with you, or you with me: no use for us to reproach each other. I can only hope that you are, at least in part, mistaken. You must do what you can to repair your fault, and to help me to repair mine, if I, too, have been to blame.”

“Hush!” exclaimed her ladyship, looking up suddenly now; though she had given no previous sign that her distress was abating. Indeed, his serious tone had seemed to increase it. “Hush! here comes Lord Winstay.” She passed her handkerchief over her face, her hand over her disordered curls. “Not a word of my part in this before him,” she said, in an entreating tone; then she turned from the light and bent over her work.

There was not much need for all this precaution. Lord Winstay was not observant, and his wife’s face was not one

that long bore traces of any emotion. In a few moments she was smiling brilliantly into her lord's eyes, talking as gaily as usual, reproaching him for his desertion of her all through the long morning. Nevertheless, when she was not smiling, nor speaking, when she believed herself to be unobserved, an expression of care and anxiety, mingled with a scheming look, settled upon her features.

"My dear Rosa, I am sorry," Lord Winstay was saying, when Mr. Hilhouse, whose temperament was not so facile as his cousin's, was able to attend to what was passing; "but I cannot drive you out this evening as I had hoped to do. I am obliged to see some one at Deerhurst on a matter connected with the business that has occupied me this morning."

"Lord Winstay, that is too bad! Always 'business' when I want you to do anything. I have been at home and alone all day, and I am to be so all this beautiful evening, too, I suppose."

"The loss and disappointment are so greatly mine, my love, that apologies would be out of place. But I do not see that you need lose your drive: I have no doubt Herbert will fill my place."

"Why couldn't you take me to Deerhurst with you?" asked her ladyship. "I would as soon drive there as anywhere else."

The truth being that she did not much like the idea of a *tête-à-tête* drive with her cousin that evening. He was going to make her do something disagreeable, she was sure; see Esterel, perhaps, and explain matters, which would be folly. "She will hear the news soon enough," her ladyship thought.

"As I go on a matter of business, it is not fitting that I should take a lady with me," Lord Winstay answered.

"Are you not a punctilious darling!" exclaimed the lady, throwing her arms round her lord and inflicting a kiss upon him.

"You are too impulsive, Rosa!" the flattered husband remarked, indulgently, as he resettled his disarranged cravat.

At this moment dinner was announced.

"Remember, Herbert, not for worlds one word before him. Promise!" Lady Winstay said this to her cousin as her husband stooped to pick up the various articles she had dropped from her lap as she rose.

"I promise," Mr. Hilhouse said, contemptuously, louder than Rosa thought quite safe.

"To drive me out after dinner?"

"Certainly, if I may take you where I choose," he added, with a sudden thought.

"I have no doubt you will do that," Lord Winstay remarked, with a smile. "You manage Lady Winstay better than I succeed in doing, Hilhouse. I must get you to tell me the secret."

"Fear, my lord: I govern, if I govern, by fear."

"I do not envy the future Mrs. Hilhouse!"

"Different natures require different treatment, my lord."

The lover smiled tenderly, thinking of Marian, and Lady Winstay caught him with that smile on his lips.

"I shall hate her," she muttered. "Whoever she is I shall hate her."



CHAPTER XIX.

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB.

"And where are you going to take me?" Lady Winstay asked, as she settled herself comfortably in her pretty pony-carriage. If Lady Winstay had been going to execution (and she now felt rather as if she were) she would have liked to go comfortably.

Mr. Hilhouse jumped in beside her, gathered up the reins, whipped the ponies on to their full speed, compressed an always resolute mouth, and did not, at first, answer.

Lady Winstay shook him by the arm, and repeated her

question ; repeated it sharply, as she saw him turn the ponies' heads towards Bramblebridge, when they had cleared the Castle grounds.

"I am not going to take you to the Hall to-night, as you fear," he answered then. "To-morrow you must go there, but I shall not drive you. It is not right that our friend—however much you may be, as I trust you are, mistaken about her feelings in the matter—should be left to learn the news of my engagement accidentally. You must tell it to her yourself, and not later than to-morrow."

"A very pleasant business, pleasantly proposed."

"I cannot believe that you will find the business, as you call it, unpleasant in the way, or from the cause, that you imagine."

"A man's *cannot*, meaning *will not*. Don't whip my ponies so unmercifully. As yet I am not in a position to do your bidding. You," toying carelessly with her parasol, letting its long fringe drop over her face, "have not told me the name of the lady of your choice."

Lady Winstay held her breath for his answer ; it came short and stern,—

"Marian Fay, the gamekeeper's daughter, is, please God, soon to be my wife !"

He did not look towards Lady Winstay ; had he done so, he would not have seen any expression of surprise upon her face—neither of surprise, nor of any other emotion. Her features, of somewhat doll-like prettiness, could on occasion assume a doll-like stolidity. He ought to have felt something ominous in the silence with which his announcement was received. Had her ladyship abused him in good set terms, burst into passionate invective, it would have been better—more what he should have expected.

In truth Mr. Hilhouse bestowed no thought whatever upon his cousin just then : his own last words, spoken so sternly, woke a thousand sweet, tender-toned echoes, and to these he listened.

When Lady Winstay, after a quarter of an hour's silence, said quietly, as if assuring herself that she had heard aright,

"Marian Fay, the gamekeeper's daughter, is soon to be your wife?"—

He did not know that her words had not followed almost immediately upon his.

"Esterel's pet and *protégée*!" she continued, in a tone still quiet, but bitter exceedingly. "A girl she has treated like a sister, a girl who owes to Esterel all she is and knows! The prettiest of pretty entanglements! How do you mean to get out of it, if I may inquire?"

"I do not see that there is any entanglement. Supposing there were, I should untwine threads that could be untwined, and break others."

"'Break others,' of course! Even if a heart has to be broken. A woman's heart is nothing! Anything that will not bend to a man's will, must, of course, be broken."

"Don't talk nonsense, Rosa," he said, sharply; adding, in a more conciliatory manner, "If you will but see Marian with unprejudiced eyes, you will not find my conduct so unreasonable and extraordinary."

"I haven't said that I do find it either. Now if you are not taking me to the Hall, where are you taking me?"

"We are going to leave the carriage at the south lodge; one of the children there can stand by the ponies. I am going to take you a little way into the wood, and——"

"Murder me if I don't promise to do all you wish about Marian Fay, perhaps?"

"Not exactly. But I want you to be kind to her, Rosa. The poor child is timid, and so very humble; so afraid she cannot make me happy, and all that sort of thing. She will need a friend—a friend in your position—to re-assure her. Be kind to her, Rosa, for my sake, till you learn to love her for her own sake."

Lady Winstay's eyes brightened as she listened to this.

"If you speak in that way, I shall have to do all you

wish, you know," she said. "But am I to go to the cottage to-night? Indeed, I don't dare. I might meet Esterel."

"She is never there now; but that you should go to the cottage, that is not my plan. I want you to wait while I fetch Marian to you in the wood. I can plunge through a short cut which would tear your wide-spreading flounces to tatters. Will you promise to speak kindly to my lovely wood-fairy?"

"If you will promise to leave us together a little while." Certainly Lady Winstay was quick, if shallow, witted: like lightning, a thought had flashed across her scheming brain. "We shall neither of us be at ease if you stand by and watch how we treat each other," she added: "if you leave us together I promise to be quite kind."

"It shall be as you wish," he answered.

They left the carriage at the lodge, with the explanation that they were going to walk a little way into the wood. Mr. Hilhouse made a comfortable couch for Lady Winstay, by spreading the carriage-rug over one of the dwarfed beech-shrubs, in a comparatively open spot; then he dashed off to fetch Marian. Lady Winstay had time for meditation, time to mature her plans, even time to get rather nervous at the silence and solitude; the beauty of the evening light, slanting on the beeches and making all the ferny foreground golden, being lost upon her eyes, which saw as if they saw not.

Marian had risen up meekly, without any demur, when her lover, rushing in out of breath, told her that he wanted her; but she looked pale and grave as she followed close while he fought a clear path for her—the proper way was much farther round, and it was getting late. He had not much time to notice Marian: he attributed her quietness to timidity; and when, just before they came to where he had left Lady Winstay, there was room for him to walk by her side he strove to re-assure her.

"Don't be afraid of my cousin, Marian; she is kind-hearted and will soon learn to love you. Rosa is not one of those born great ladies of whom your father is afraid for you.

You are not going to marry a Lord of Burleigh, sweet; I am not going to perplex you

‘With the burden of an honour,
Unto which you were not born.’

I am but a poor man who will work for my bread and yours; and my cousin has known what it is to work for hers.”

“I do not think I am afraid,” said Marian, simply and sweetly, “except of you and for you.”

“Afraid of me! this morning you were not.”

“It is different now. If I belong to you I shall be afraid of not being fit to belong to you, and afraid that people will think less of you for choosing a poor girl when——”

He bent over her, kissed her on the forehead gently and reverently. So interrupted, she did not finish her sentence, for in another moment they were in sight of Lady Winstay.

Lady Winstay rose and came to meet them. She took Marian by the hand and kissed her on the cheek. After a long, scrutinizing look, she said,—

“You are as good as you are pretty, I think, child.” She kept the girl’s hand in hers, and turned to her cousin with a face that said, “Remember your promise.”

“For how long am I to be banished?” he asked. “Lady Winstay wants you all to herself,” he explained to Marian.

“Let us have at least half-an-hour’s talk together: that is little enough time in which to learn to know a new cousin.”

“Thank you, Rosa.” Mr. Hilhouse, pleased that she spoke so kindly, kissed her hand: then, with a smile for Marian, he left them together—the wily wolf and the meek and innocent lamb.

Lady Winstay, putting her arm round Marian’s waist, drew her down beside her on to the seat from which she had risen. She did not speak till Mr. Hilhouse was out of sight. Then, removing her arm from Marian’s waist, she took her by both hands. Looking her in the face with an air of grave compassion, she asked,—

"My poor child, do you love my cousin?" Tears shone in Lady Winstay's eyes after she had spoken. Either she could bring them there at will, or she spoke with an earnestness of purpose that brought them.

Marian looked down. All was so new, so uncertain, her gentle mind was so perplexed by hopes and fears that it was pain to have to proclaim her love.

Lady Winstay repeated her question urgently, with a firmer pressure of the passive hands she held: then Marian looked up, and answered, by the question,—

"How can I help it?"

"How, indeed, my poor, poor child!"

At this excess of pity, Marian wondered. It was genuine pity: Lady Winstay already looked upon Marian as her victim, and compassionated her accordingly.

"I do not suppose you could help it," she continued. "How should you, indeed, poor little innocent! Marian, I loved my cousin once—in that way, I mean: he loved me, too. We were to have been married more than ten long years ago!" her ladyship sighed, heavily. "Because I loved him, Marian, I gave him up." Marian's soft eyes grew pitiful now, for the tears were dropping down Lady Winstay's cheek; who continued—"Herbert was then, and is now, ambitious. I knew that, though he loved me, it would not be for his happiness that I should marry him. We should have had next to nothing between us. Herbert is not much richer now; he spends as soon as he earns, always: men like him cannot stoop to practise small economies. Nothing is so hard for a man like Herbert, nothing so miserably drags him down, as to have to grind on day by day working for the daily bread of wife and children, instead of working for name and fame as genius and inclination prompt. In the end this sort of thing crushes the very life out of such a man. I thought of all this, Marian, though I was as young then as you are now. I had been brought up in a hard school, and I had learnt a great deal of which you, sweet child, know nothing. Because I loved

Herbert I gave him up. He did not understand me : he has not forgiven me ; he thinks even now that *I* wanted wealth and position for myself ! As if these things were of any value to a woman ! Of course, Marian, I love my husband now ; but women who have loved as I loved Herbert cannot quite forget, and I still have his happiness very near my heart. It is because I believe that you really love my cousin, that I speak to you frankly. To most girls in your position it would be no use to speak : they would marry any gentleman who asked them, and let what would come after ; but you—you really love, I think, my child."

Lady Winstay had noted all the changes on poor Marian's face : had seen her eyes dilate with wonder, fear, pain ; her sensitive mouth and nostril quiver ; her face flush crimson, and then turn white as a blossoming thorn.

She watched her now with a sort of pitiless pity, softly caressing her, calling her "poor, poor child."

Presently, as if she doubted having said enough, she put her lips to Marian's ear and whispered,—

"Esterel ! poor Esterel ! this will drive her *mad* !"

Marian shrank as if she had been stabbed ; as if Lady Winstay's breath burnt her : to have a dread hardly recognized to herself thus coarsely thrust in her face by another as a certainty, was terrible indeed. After that cruel thrust she seemed to be turning to stone ; her eyes fixed on Lady Winstay's eyes, her hands growing icy cold in Lady Winstay's grasp. This was not what Rosa had expected, and it frightened her a little.

She rose and drew Marian up ; it would not do for Marian to be seen by her lover again that night, she thought. So she said,—

"It is late and cold, dear ; I will go part of the way home with you. Show me the easiest road."

(You would choose the "easiest" road to hell, Lady Winstay !)

They walked towards the cottage, Lady Winstay's arm

round Marian, drawing her on faster than her reluctant feet would otherwise have carried her.

"Do not take it too much to heart, dear child," she said. "I do not tell you to do this, or not to do that; I only ask you to think it all over. If you believe he will be happy, not only for a few weeks but for long years, giving up everything, society—for he will not leave you alone, nor take you where you would be ill at ease—society, position, together with all his hopes and ambitions: giving up all this for your sweet sake; if you think he could be happy, why, then, I can only hope you may not prove as mistaken as I think you will. I would give you one word of warning; do not be led astray by an exaggerated notion of what he will suffer if you see fit to give him up. He has loved before, and he will love again: men are not like women, Marian."

In sight of the cottage, she took Marian in her arms and kissed her on both cheeks. "Go home, dear," she said: "I will love and pity you always."

She watched till she saw the cottage door close behind her victim: as she did not doubt Marian to be. Then she swiftly went back to the spot where Mr. Hilhouse had left them: he was standing there now in blank astonishment. She began to speak as soon as she thought there was any chance he could hear her.

"How long you stayed away! It turned so cold, I walked towards her home with the dear child. Not very considerate of you to bring her out so late without seeing her properly wrapped up: she had no shawl at all on! and those small cottages are always close and hot. But men never are considerate: I do not know why I should expect it. Why did you stay away so long?"

"You make a strange confusion in one's ideas. Long! I stayed a shorter time by ten minutes, than you bade me. Cold! the evening is sultry and oppressive in the extreme. And you have hurried Marian home without my bidding her good night! Something is amiss: I have a good mind to leave

you here as a punishment, and go and see what. Have you made her cry ? ”

“ On my honour, no ; I have not made its darling cry. If the time seemed to me long,” she said, suppressing, or rather pretending to suppress, a yawn, “ I suppose it was that our conversation was not exciting. Naturally we had not much in common. Now, for goodness sake, let us go home ; I am sure we are going to have rain, and plenty of it.”

Mr. Hilhouse, sulky and dissatisfied, allowed himself to be led towards the lodge ; resolving that to-morrow he would extract from Marian the whole truth as to what had passed between her and his cousin.

Before they reached home, great drops of rain began to fall.

“ Lord Winstay will get a drenching, unless he is back,” his wife remarked, carelessly. Then she added, in a tone anything but careless,—“ Remember, Herbert, whatever happens, that you have given me your promise not to mention my name in this affair to Lord Winstay.”

“ ‘ Whatever happens ! ’ you expect suicide and murder at the least, apparently. And really, Rosa, you are an arrant coward ; one would think your husband occasionally exercised his marital privilege by beating you—as, in his position, I think I might be tempted to do,” he added.

“ You do not know what Lord Winstay’s anger is, when he is angry ; I do. As to the other matter, I advise you not to speak lightly. Some women have not as much brain to regulate their heart as I have. If a woman, having more heart than head, gives herself up to her passions, any tragedy becomes possible.”

Mr. Hilhouse, though not in a merry humour, burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, of which the only explanation he vouchsafed was contained in the words,—

“ Really, Rosa, you are becoming most oppressively wise.”

“ You have never done justice either to my wisdom or to my affection, Herbert.”

"Then, at least, I have not done justice to your head at the expense of your heart, as you would express it," he answered.

People, her cousin among them, were apt to say of Lady Winstay,—

"Understand her ! there is nothing to understand."

This was true enough ; yet not true in the sense in which it was said. While everybody thought they knew her thoroughly, and would have been ready enough to count up her qualities, good and bad, on their fingers, the fact was that nobody knew her ; least of all did she know herself, and this really because there *was* nothing to understand. In her nature there was nothing permanent ; the elements of her character were always shifting and changing, forming a quicksand in which was wrecked now a vice, now a virtue. She had some talent for deceiving others ; but her grant talent was for self-deceit : it may be that it was only through this power of deceiving herself that she had her power of deceiving others.



CHAPTER XX.

IN THE TOILS.

THE moonlight, barred by the shadows of the pines, slept peacefully on the open glade outside Marian's window ; the yews and cypresses that hid the Pool looked blacker even than their wont, by contrast with the white sheen of the sward that sloped down to their drapery-hidden feet.

It was late, past midnight, but Marian was at her window ; she had lain down and risen again : for her to-night was neither sleep nor rest. It seemed to her that the storm which had lately passed over had not cooled nor cleared the air, that the atmosphere was more and more sultry and oppressive.

The poison of Lady Winstay's words, rankling at her

heart, fevered all her blood. She had wept, but could not weep it away ; she had prayed, but it was still there.

"If I could but tell what is right," she moaned—"if I could but tell what is right ! But my heart is gone out of me, I love him so ; and all my little sense is gone with it. How can I tell what is right—how can I tell what is right ? "

She had gone to the window, with nothing but her white night-dress on ; she stood there looking out with eyes that saw nothing, till they saw something moving—something black and slim as the shadows of the pines—moving across the moonlight, coming from among the shrubs around the Pool up to her window.

Marian's heart died within her for fear. Soon a face she knew—a white face lighted by eyes that had a wild gleam in them—looked into her face. It was a voice she knew that said,—

"Make no noise, Marian, if you ever loved me. I must talk to you to-night : help me to get in at the window."

"Now, God guide me ! God guide me !" implored poor Marian.

She put a chair to the window ; kneeling on it, she stretched out her strong young arms, and drew her mistress in.

Esterel standing within the room, let the long cloak—a cloak of Mr. Downside's, which had shrouded her from head to foot—drop from round her. Marian, in whom orderliness was an instinct, stooped to pick it up. As she did so she clasped and kissed Esterel's hand : then she hung the cloak—it was dripping wet from contact with drenched grass and bushes—upon a chair, arranging it as she thought it would dry most easily.

"You do not seem surprised ; you do not ask me why I come," Esterel said. As she spoke she sat down on the little tumbled bed, where Marian had tossed about for an hour or so, and drew Marian down beside her.

Marian shivered ; again she kissed Esterel's hand. Was

it a kiss of deprecation? Did it mean, "Dear mistress, spare me?"

"You love me still then, Marian?" Esterel asked.

She clasped the young girl in her arms; and for a moment she listened to a voice that whispered, "Bless the child; leave her her happiness and go your own way." But just then her eyes caught the glitter of the ring which Mr. Hilhouse had put on Marian's finger; his own ring, put there, he had told her, to keep the place for one he would get for her. At this, Esterel's clasp of the poor girl tightened till the mutual pressure was pain to them both.

Looking down upon Marian's face as she held it against her breast, Esterel said wildly,—

"*He* put that ring upon your finger! he has put his lips upon your face; he has held you in his arms. And I love him, Marian—love him with such love as you cannot dream of—love him so that I *can* have no life without him!"

How she knew, it did not occur to Marian to wonder; afterwards she recalled her fancy that she had seen a white face look through the bushes by the Pool as her lover parted from her.

Marian's heart shuddered: she did not strive, nor cry; she lay still in those cruel arms, looking up into the face which seemed as cruel then. She was on the point of fainting, when Esterel relaxed her hold; released, Marian slipped down upon the ground at Esterel's feet.

"If I only could suffer, I would give him up!" she whispered. "I would like to suffer, even if it killed me, to spare you pain; if I only could suffer; if God would kindly let me bear all the pain!"

"Do not think that I mean to live to suffer—to live to be driven mad. No, Marian: if you will not help me I shall die. It is easy to die, Marian. Not in the Pool; that is so dark and foul. There are glorious ways of death: the leap from the Bramble Bridge, or the priest's leap from the belfry—glorious ways of death, both of them."

Marian wound her arms round her mistress's slight waist as if to hold her fast from such sin.

"Hush, my darling Miss Esterel! God hears all, and your wild words are wicked," she said. "It would be no use, you know—no use at all to die so; you could not kill the part of you that suffers. For no gain, you would have committed a great sin."

Esterel did not appear to pay Marian's words any heed. Putting the hair back from the up-turned face, she said,—

"What does he call you, child? His primrose, his wild wood-flower, his pretty one, his lovely one? A thousand tender names your lover calls you, does he not, Marian? *Your* lover, who ought to be mine; who would have been mine but for you, Marian: who shall be mine, spite of you, Marian!" She laughed below her breath; all through, she spoke below her breath; and her words seemed the more fearful for being uttered in this suppressed voice: passionate as they sounded, they seemed but indications of depths of passion that could not be sounded.

"Be calm, I implore you, Miss Esterel!" pleaded Marian, still on her knees. "Tell me what I can do, that I may do, which would give you any comfort."

There was a dread pause. Marian, faint and sick, bowed her head down upon Esterel's lap.

When Esterel spoke it was hurriedly.

"You used to say, Marian, that you longed to show me how you loved me; I said, 'The time may come:' it is come. I do not ask you to give him up, only to let him give you up. This is easy, for it will prove that he does not love you. I ask you, Marian, to go away for a while without seeing him again; to stay away without letting any one know where you are."

"Not that, not that; anything but that!" exclaimed Marian, lifting up her patient face. "He would suffer so; Miss Esterel, for indeed, indeed, he loves me! I cannot pain him as that would pain him. If you love him, you will not

wish to make him suffer. And it would be no use—no use,” she added, eagerly: “no use, no use: he would be faithful; for indeed, indeed, he loves me.”

When she had finished speaking, Marian crouched at Esterel’s feet, as if she hoped by her humility to deprive her words of their sting. Esterel looked down upon her with a face at once agonized and remorseless.

“Once you used to long for something to be given to me that would make me love life,” she said. “I have learnt to love life, to know how sweet it might be, and now you take away the gift you said you longed that I should have. I talk of dying—and I *will* die if you take him from me; but, oh, I long to live!”

“If I would, I could not make him love you, Miss Esterel. I know I am not worthy of him. I cannot tell how he can love me. But he loves me: indeed he loves me.”

“You think he could not love *me*?” asked Esterel. She rose, pulled off the shawl that still half-shrouded her, and stood in the moonlight, bidding Marian look at her. She wore an evening dress, white and pure as a bride’s dress; the moonlight glistened on its folds, glistened on her arms and bosom, making their shining whiteness dazzling. Lifting up the lily-arms, she drew out the silken lengths of her loosened hair.

“You think he could not love *me*?” she repeated, in no mocking tone. “I know I am not lovely, as you are, Marian, with the loveliness he likes best; but he might love me: he would love me if you were gone.”

“You are beautiful, Miss Esterel! I am not worthy to be your servant, or his. Oh, you *are* beautiful!” she repeated, with an expression of heart-stricken admiration. “Beautiful, and far more fit to be his wife; but he loves *me*, you see, Miss Esterel: he loves *me*.”

“He thinks so now; but men are not constant as women are. He has loved before, and he will love again.”

“Lady Winstay’s words!” thought poor Marian.

“Marian, what can you give your lover?”

“All my love, all my life: he wants no more from me.”

“I would give him all *my* love, all *my* life, and much more, Marian; gifts that men value. I should give him wealth; he would not value it for its own sake, but he would value it for what it would bring—freedom to do what he liked and to live where he liked. I would help him to win power, for all my soul would be his: I would have no will but his, no conscience but his, no god but him. He ought to move as a king among other men, Marian; and if he marries me, he might rule the land, leading its rulers. Would you not like to have him do this, child?”

“If he could be happy.” Marian’s strength and confidence were ebbing. Such a day as this, the poor child, whose earlier days had been so calm and still, had never known. The poor little flower was bowing its head to the ground beneath the tempest, ready for any foot to trample upon it.

“If he marries you, Marian, he whom I would help to be master over many, will be the servant of mean men. If you marry him you will show your love by laying burdens upon him which he will find grievous to bear. He will have to lead a grovelling, ignoble life, toiling for bread. Will you condemn him to this, Marian?”

Marian had bowed herself down to the ground, her head lay upon her arms, which were stretched out upon the floor: even now she tried to repeat her talisman, “But he loves me, and I cannot make him suffer.”

Esterel caught the faint words, and answered,—

“A little pain now, Marian, to save him from endless pain, grievous humiliation, hereafter.”

Very feebly Marian lifted herself up, and as if her heart were utterly broken, she said,—

“Do with me what you will. I will go away. If he can love you and forget me”—here she gave a little gasp—“it will be better for him; and God is very good: so good that I

think He will let me die, and give me some place where I shall not remember."

Esterel clasped Marian in her arms.

"You have saved me, Marian! If you would not help me, I meant to die to-night. I should have been afraid to live, for it must be much better to die than to go mad. Long ago—so long that I can't remember who said it—I heard them say that any great grief would drive me mad. I know it would. Often, often lately I have felt as if my brain were all on fire, and were burning itself out. You have saved me, Marian. I think you are as good as if you were one of God's holy angels. I think He will not let you suffer much. If I had died, Marian, by my own deed, to-night, you would never have been happy. So I am not taking your happiness away, am I, dear? Kiss me, and tell me you forgive me."

Marian put her arm round Esterel's neck, her cheek against her cheek; she murmured,—

"God heal you, and give you peace. I fear I have lost His peace. All seems wrong with me, whichever way I turn."

"But you have promised, Marian."

"Yes," she answered, wearily; "I have promised."

"Not even your mother must know, or it will be no use!"

"Not even my mother, or it will be no use. Oh, the pain, the pain! If only I might have it all: if even I might be sure I have the worst pain. What is it all for?" asked the poor bewildered girl, passing her hand across her brow. "What am I to go away for?"

"To save my life, Marian: as you believe, my life in this world and in the next. And to save him, Marian, from throwing all his life away."

Marian groaned.

"You will want money," Esterel said. "See, I have plenty; you must take it all."

"I cannot take money; I should feel as if I sold my heart."

"But you must have it: you must live."

"As long as He pleases."

"You will be careful of yourself, Marian. I mean, you know you are pretty and innocent, Marian—you must keep out of danger."

Already remorse was gnawing at the passionate heart.

"Miss Esterel!" Marian answered, hope and courage reviving for a moment. "I shall think of myself, as, perhaps, some day, to be his wife. *You*, perhaps, will some day send for me. He will suffer: you will not bear to see him suffer; you will send for Marian?"

"I must not be able to do that, if I would. I must not know where you are."

"After a time, perhaps, I might find a way—a safe way, to let you know."

"Do not cling to hope, Marian. He *shall* love me."

To that Marian made no answer. Sitting side by side on the bed again, they spoke of other things connected with Marian's departure. The moon had sunk behind the trees, or the sky had clouded over, and they could hardly see each other's faces now.

"The night is nearly past; you had better leave me and go home," Marian said: "before the sun rises I will start." She put Esterel's cloak round her, saying as she did so, "I don't like to think of your going through the wood alone. If you should meet any one?"

Esterel drew out a little shining weapon from her bosom.

"I am safe, you see," she said, replacing it.

She kissed Marian again and again passionately, then departed by the window as she had come.

Once, after Marian thought her quite gone, she returned to say,—

"I may trust you, Marian?"

To which Marian only answered,—

"You may trust me."



CHAPTER XXI.

GONE !

STERNLY determined that Lady Winstay should perform the penance he had planned for her, should tell Esterel of his engagement to Marian, Mr. Hilhouse would not leave the Castle next morning till he had seen her ladyship start for the Hall.

His patience was pretty well tried. He had greatly desired to see Marian early that morning : he had a feeling that all was not well with her ; that Lady Winstay had in some way troubled and pained her the evening before. Let him be as impatient as he might, his fair cousin was not to be hurried.

At last she was off : then he mounted, and in all haste, by narrower ways than Lady Winstay's carriage could take, rode to the cottage.

The sound of his horse's feet brought no sweet face to the window ; the cottage-door was open, but no one stood there to welcome him.

He tied his horse to the paling and went in. The kitchen was empty, there was no fire in the grate, no sign that it had been used that morning. Marian's parlour, too, was empty. The room was filled with the fragrance of lilies she had gathered yesterday. Marian's work-box and the half-made dress he had yesterday admired were on the table : the box shut, the dress neatly folded together. He called Mrs. Fay's name and Marian's ; no one answered him : all was silence and emptiness. The door from the parlour into Marian's bed-room was open, and he even looked in there. The little room was neat and orderly, as if she were to sleep there again that night. Marian had arranged it before she left.

Something in the silence of the empty cottage struck a chill to the lover's heart. He had expected so different a reception. All the way he had been picturing to himself how Marian would meet him ; how sweetly, shyly, happily she would greet

him. How long, he had wondered, would it take to make her familiar with her new position towards him? When would she leave off calling him "sir," and give him some nearer and dearer title?

Mr. Hilhouse stood in the porch, pondering what this desertion of the house might mean. Presently he saw Luke Fay approaching: stooping, his eyes bent upon the ground, Luke looked an older man by ten years than he had done yesterday. Taking no heed of anything, he had not noticed the horse tied to the railing, and he started when Mr. Hilhouse, meeting him on the garden-path, spoke to him.

"Where's my girl?" he cried, harshly. "Where's Marian? *You* here: where's Marian?"

"The question I was about to ask," Mr. Hilhouse said.

Luke was known for a sober man, and it was not yet mid-day, yet a hope that Luke had been drinking occurred to Mr. Hilhouse. The tone, the look, the words had made him recoil; but trying to believe that Luke had been drinking, he asked, calmly,—

"Where is Marian?"

"They that hide can find," Luke returned, coarsely. "Where's my girl? I *will* know what you've done with my girl."

Mr. Hilhouse went close to Luke and gripped him by the arm.

"Old man, you have been drinking. Try to sober yourself: speak plainly. I ask you, what is it you mean? Where is Marian?"

"And I ask where is Marian?" After a pause, and a keen search of the lover's face, he added, in a heart-broken way,— "If you don't know, sir, only God in heaven can tell."

Mr. Hilhouse loosed the man's arm, and staggered back against the wall: they stood thus in the porch, her father and her lover looking blankly into each other's faces.

"Where is your wife?" asked Mr. Hilhouse, by-and-by. "Surely Marian is with her mother."

"Her mother's been seeking her since morning. She's gone, sir: Marian's gone. Marian's left us!"

"Good God! gone! but where? gone where?"

The wildest fears and suspicions flashed across his mind.

"As I said before, if you don't know, sir—as it seems to me you don't—only God Almighty can know."

"I know nothing; tell me all you can, quickly."

"I must go in and sit down," moaned Luke, and he moved into the house. Entering the kitchen he dropped into a chair, passed his handkerchief across his brow, and said,—
"I ask your pardon for anything I've said unjustly; in our trouble we suspected you, sir."

"Of what?"

"Of never having meant to marry Marian, and of having enticed her from us. We were just wild, and didn't know what to suspect."

"For Heaven's sake, tell me all you know."

"We know nothing, sir, but that Marian's gone."

"When did she go?"

"It must have been a bit before sunrise, we guess."

"Where can she have gone?"

"If we did but know! if we did but know!"

"Has she left no sign? do you guess no cause?"

"Last night she seemed very low, after my Lady Winstay had been talking to her it was; her mother found her crying as if her little heart would break. But she said it was not my lady's fault; she said my lady had been kind to her, had kissed her, and spoken to her as tenderlike as if she'd been her sister. For all that, the mother thinks the lady let fall something that hurt our girl. However, she went to bed as usual. This morning she's gone, that's all we know! She's taken a few bits of clothes with her, and nothing more."

"Did she leave no letter?"

Luke fumbled in his pocket, and produced a scrap of paper, which he handed to Mr. Hilhouse; it was a leaf torn from a book, on which was written in pencil,—

"Try not to grieve much, darling mother. I am going away, but when we meet again, please God you will not have to be ashamed of poor Marian. Don't let father think harm of me, mother, and tell *him* to try and forget me. It almost breaks my heart to go ; but I can't, can't stay."

Mr. Hilhouse turned away to read those tremulously written words, going close to the window, as if there were not light enough elsewhere. He marked the places where Marian's tears had fallen, and raised the paper to his lips, muttering,—

"There has been foul play ! She loved me : I *know* she loved me."

As yet there was no suspicion in his heart, except that which fell on Lady Winstay. His face looked black and lowering, as he thought, "That smooth-faced doll has deceived me ! She has been tampering with my Marian. I will make her pay dearly for every tear she has cost my poor child."

He had no doubt but that in a few days Marian would be found : no doubt but that he should be able to extract the truth as to where she was from Lady Winstay.

"What have you done ? What search have you made ?" he asked.

Luke told him.

"And the Cove—Bramblebridge Cove ? May she not have taken a boat there ?"

Luke shook his head, but he rose, saying he would go down there and try if he could learn anything.

"I have my own inquiries to make," Mr. Hilhouse said, sternly. "Lady Winstay shall tell me all that passed between her and Marian."

They talked together a while longer ; Mr. Hilhouse striving to reassure the father, saying that Marian could not keep herself hidden from them long, such search as they would make ; then wringing each other's hands, the two men parted at the gate, Luke going to the Cove, Mr. Hilhouse riding to the Hall.

CHAPTER XXII.

SELF-CONVICTED, THOUGH INNOCENT.

MANY things combined to fix all Mr. Hilhouse's suspicion on Lady Winstay. The way she had hurried Marian home last night before he had seen her again; her urgency in making him promise that "happen what might," he would not mention her name in this matter to Lord Winstay—"A promise which shall be kept as she deserves that it should be kept," he muttered. As he thought of the tears his "poor child" had shed, of what she must have suffered, of the risks to which she might unconsciously expose herself, of the dangers that would inevitably surround one so innocent, so confiding, so lovely, and the hideous gulf of ruin that would gape for her: as he thought of these things, his blood ran cold for fear, afterwards to boil with indignation and anger. By the time he reached the Hall, he had lashed himself into a state of uncontrollable fury against Lady Winstay, looking upon her as the instrument of all this evil. Riding first to the stable, he gave his horse in charge to one of the grooms, and walked round to the south entrance. The door stood open, but he encountered Esterel's maid in the hall, and she told him that her mistress was ill, that she had met with an accident, and could not see any one. Paying no heed at all to this, he mounted the staircase and proceeded straight to Esterel's morning-room, where he thought he was most likely to find Lady Winstay.

The room was darkened. Esterel was on a couch, and Lady Winstay sat by her in a low chair. Lady Winstay was very much at her ease, mind and body: she had accomplished her task, and there had been no unpleasant scene; Esterel had not seemed even surprised. "I knew that the cottage had lately been more attractive than the Hall," was all the answer she had made to her ladyship's intelligence. On this, Lady

Winstay began to think that she had wasted a great deal of compassion ; that she had been mistaken altogether about Esterel's feelings for her cousin ; that, had he made her an offer, he might probably have been subjected to a refusal. Lady Winstay, pondering over these things, greatly relieved and yet considerably mystified, inwardly resolved that, whether Esterel loved him or not, Marian should not marry her cousin if she could help it. While she was thus thinking, and Esterel was chiefly occupied in bearing acute physical pain, Mr. Hilhouse entered the room, hurriedly and unannounced.

" Confess all, at once ! " were his first and rather startling words, as he walked up to Lady Winstay. " What did you say to her last night ? Where have you sent her ? Confess all, at once ! "

Lady Winstay changed colour guiltily : putting on a bold face, however, she said, —

" Are you gone mad, Herbert ? What is the meaning of this strange conduct ? Surely, you were told that Esterel could not see you, yet you come blustering in with your mock heroics in this ungentlemanly manner ! "

Esterel shrank a little deeper into her pillows, covering her face with her hand. " If he had come to me so ! " she thought.

" I apologize to Miss Downside for my abruptness, which she will be the first to excuse when she knows the reason of it. Follow me to another room, Lady Winstay ; I must have an explanation with you. "

" Stay here, " begged Esterel, faintly. " I shall not mind. What has happened ? What is the matter ? If I may, I should like to hear. "

While Lady Winstay changed colour rapidly, Esterel was as white as her white wrapper, and with as unvarying a whiteness.

Mr. Hilhouse spoke more gently, after having glanced at Esterel.

" Our explanation can hardly be pleasant to hear, Miss

Downside. I would rather spare you the agitation. You are suffering. I heard something about an accident—nothing serious, I hope ?”

“ She has hurt her shoulder : dislocated it, I am afraid” (this was said quite at random). “ No ! I shall not go away with you !” cried Lady Winstay, whose wrist Mr. Hilhouse had grasped while he spoke to Esterel. “ I am afraid to be alone with you, and I can’t leave Esterel. Calm down and explain yourself here, quietly, without any more melodramatic airs !” She snatched her wrist from his grasp, and settled herself resolutely in her chair.

He laid his hand on her shoulder, he did not know how heavily : no doubt he longed to shake her. Had she been a poor man’s wife, her ladyship would, I think, have been the frequent victim of some wife-beating “ monster.” He controlled himself, and said,—

“ Marian is gone : she left her home before daybreak this morning. No one knows, yourself excepted, where she is gone ; no one knows, yourself excepted, why she is gone. You must tell us these things, Lady Winstay.”

“ Marian gone ! already !” cried Lady Winstay. The first two words were spoken with a genuine wonder that would have gone far towards exonerating her from suspicion, had she not added the third. It seemed to her as if she had lightly touched a complicated piece of machinery with her finger, and as if that light touch had set it to work—to work all her will : she was astonished at her own success.

“ Already !” echoed Mr. Hilhouse. “ Then you meant her to go, only not quite so soon.”

“ I didn’t say so !” answered Lady Winstay. Her whole manner confessed guilt, but *she* would not confess it. She tried to brave the matter out ; to turn his fright, as she called it, at Marian’s unexplained disappearance for a morning, to ridicule ; tried to make him believe she believed that Marian would be home again before night, and would laugh at the panic her brief absence had caused.

He drew out Marian's letter. Lady Winstay read it, and then said,—

“ This alters the case. No doubt, she has a more favoured suitor.”

Esterel stretched an eager hand for it : she, too, read it. “ Poor, poor little Marian ! ” she repeated, with such genuine pity in her tone that it touched Mr. Hilhouse with gratitude.

But he soon turned from Esterel to his cousin : he threatened her with a threat that caused Lady Winstay's impudent assurance to forsake her. She had recourse to tears : she cried for mercy, entreating that he would not expose her to Lord Winstay. Finally, little by little, he dragged from her all, or the sense of all, that she had said to Marian, with the exception of the few words having reference to Esterel.

Esterel marvelled to find Marian's departure thus explained, and her own name untouched : but it was with a dull sort of wonder : for the present, the pain she was enduring, which was steadily on the increase, took all sharpness from anything else. She lay with her face pressed down into the crimson cushions, her mouth crushed against them. She heard the man's few strong words, the concentration of bitterness and contempt for a false and cruel-hearted woman ; each word was remembered, to give hereafter a pang more poignant than the sharp throes of physical pain she was now enduring.

The night before, Esterel, as she returned from the cottage, had slipped on one of those worn stone stairs leading to the oratory ; slipped, and fallen just as she had grasped the stone balustrade. Trying to save herself, her arm had sustained a violent wrench, which had seemed to her to wrench it from his socket. She had refused to have it examined ; obliged to own that she had fallen and strained herself, she declared that the hurt was nothing serious.

After his upbraiding to Lady Winstay, brief as it was bitter, Mr. Hilhouse left the room. Lady Winstay sat sobbing by Esterel ; but Esterel had no pity for her and no patience with her. Strange as it may seem, she hated her for the pain

she had inflicted on Marian and on Marian's lover. Fevered by the agitation of the last hour, the anguish her shoulder gave her became intolerable: in spite of a desperate struggle to retain the senses of which she thought she stood in such need, Esterel at last lost all consciousness; she fainted outright.



CHAPTER XXIII.

A DARK DREAD.

WHEN Esterel came to herself again, she had been taken to her bed-room and laid upon her bed. Lady Winstay, the maid, Mr. Downside, and Dr. Bridgend were round her. Dr. Bridgend was an authority to whom Esterel had learnt to submit as a child. Now, too, she was so feeble she could offer no resistance. She was examined, and dislocation of the shoulder discovered. As soon as sufficient assistance could be procured, the shoulder was set. According to Lady Winstay's account afterwards, it was a horrible business, and Esterel suffered agony with the pale patience of a martyr.

"How could she have given herself such a wrench as that?" the doctor asked Mr. Downside, as they stood by Esterel's bed, some hours afterwards.

"Our polished boards are slippery," Mr. Downside said: "I have often nearly fallen myself. No doubt, as she slipped, she grasped at something to save herself; and falling all the same, she wrenched the shoulder out of place. The same thing, in a less degree, has happened to me frequently. Our polished floors certainly are not safe."

"A foolish, obstinate girl, not to have had it attended to at once: she would have suffered much less," the doctor said, lightly stroking the uninjured hand which lay outside the coverlet.

As Esterel heard this account given of her accident, it struck her that Mr. Downside knew it not to be the true one;

knew that she had not slipped on those floors, the slipperiness of which he laid so much stress upon. "Why should he say what he knew not to be true, unless he suspected what was true?" she asked herself. Quite late in the evening, when Esterel was settled for the night, Mr. Downside came in to her room. He told the maid she might go down to her supper, and he would sit a quarter of an hour with his daughter.

He assured himself that the woman was really gone, opening the door and looking down the gallery before he spoke. Then he came close to Esterel, bent over her, and asked,—

"Is there nothing you would like to tell me—to throw a burden off your mind on to mine?" Though he was so close, he looked anywhere rather than into Esterel's face: *his* face and his whole manner expressed fearful agitation.

Esterel gazed up at him, and did not answer: holding her breath suspended, she waited to hear what he would say next.

"I should keep your secret, however terrible its nature, at any cost. Your honour is dearer to me than my own a thousand times. I might help you to keep your secret: at least I might ease you of part of its burden."

Esterel drew in her breath with a curious hissing sound, but still she did not speak; only listened for him to say more. He was wavering to and fro, growing more and more agitated.

"Have you not lost something? This?" he asked. After a glance round the room, he drew from his breast-pocket and held out to her the little weapon she had shown Marian last night.

"Where did you find it?" was all she said.

"On the terrace: at the foot of the steps."

"Then it fell from me when I fell."

He bent his head closer yet to her face, but still did not look into it as he whispered,—

"What have you done with the young girl? Tell me!

you cannot bear to keep such a secret ! What new crime is added to the fatal histories of this house ? ”

She began to understand him now : his tone and look as he bent over her curdled the blood in her veins. A kind of fascination kept her eyes, dilating as they gazed, fixed upon his face. After a few moments, from a revulsion of feeling, she burst into a low, wild, ringing laugh : she stretched her uninjured hand out for the little weapon ; but he started back, and kept it from her.

“ Look at it ! you will see it is quite clean,” she said ; “ it was not meant for that ! How could you fancy that ? It is clean, and my hands and my heart are clean from blood guiltiness.”

“ Thank God ! ” he cried, devoutly, as he wiped off a cold dew that had gathered on his forehead. “ How indeed could I fear this ? But such things have been, and in this house ; in madness—only in madness, my gentle daughter could have committed such a crime. Thank God ! ” he repeated, and knelt beside the bed.

“ I am not mad *yet*,” Esterel answered.

“ I picked it up this morning,” he explained after a time, when he was calmer, “ and I found my long cloak, wet and dirty, hanging in the hall ; but I did not think much of either of these things till this evening, in the village, I heard of the gamekeeper’s daughter having disappeared ; heard that she had been courted by Lady Winstay’s cousin, and was to have been married to him ; heard, too, a story that is already spreading through the neighbourhood, of a tall slight figure in a long cloak having been seen at a window at the back of the cottage—seen, it appears, by a man and woman on the tramp, as they were coming through the wood, from Southsand to Deerhurst. What I have suffered since I heard this story ! I grow more and more nervous daily, I fear. As I listened to all this, this evening, and remembered the dagger I had picked up——” He groaned, then added, “ Can you forgive me, my child ? ”

"Then I was seen!" Esterel said.

"This is a story which no one will heed. The man and woman will move off: I will see that they do. Nobody will heed such a story, told after the girl's disappearance; or, if they do—pretty Marian, no doubt, had other lovers besides Lady Winstay's cousin."

"Marian is as pure as a lily, and her name must be kept unspotted," Esterel said, passionately.

"If possible: if possible, of course," Mr. Downside answered, soothingly. "Can you ever forgive me my horrible thought? Remember," he pleaded, "that the wildest of horrors will sometimes seem possible, nay probable, to a brain strained, and tried, and shaken as mine has been."

"I forgive you: I am not innocent. I have sent that poor girl away I do not know where, or what harm will happen to her. Perhaps what I have done is little less cruel than what you suspected me of having done."

"Esterel, my child!" Mr. Downside said, after a pause, "more and more do I feel that the influences of this house are baneful, for you especially. Again to-day Dr. Bridgend has been urging me to take you away, to travel with you. Let us go. Learn to forget everything: let the poor girl come home, and let us go."

"I will not go; not now, not yet," Esterel answered, resolutely.

He paused; then he said—feeling that it was no use to plead now, that he should only further fever and excite her,—

"We will talk of this another time—when you are better. Is the pain decreasing? Shall you sleep?"

"I like the pain, now it is tolerable that I can endure it and keep my senses, yet sharp enough to dull other things. How is it you do not hate me," she asked, "now you know how wicked I am?"

"Nothing could make me hate you, Esterel, while I know you to be your mother's daughter."

"My mother was good—a saint. If, up in heaven, she is

loving me still, perhaps, in the end, her love will draw me up. Why, why did she not live? I have nothing to rest upon—no peace anywhere,” moaned Esterel.

“Her rest was upon what is written here,” Mr. Downside said, as he took a small Testament from his pocket and laid it on Esterel’s pillow.

She had turned her face from him, and closed her eyes: so he left her.

“He cannot help me! I can have no rest nor trust in him,” murmured Esterel. “He loves me better than he loves truth or goodness. I think he would sin for me: that cannot be loving well. Yet, do I not love *him*—Marian’s lover, better than truth or goodness? Do I not sin for him—for myself rather; just to gain him for myself? and yet——” She grew bewildered, and did not follow this line of thought further.

When her maid returned, Esterel dismissed her to her bed: the woman went, though Mr. Downside had told her not to leave his daughter. Esterel was afraid to have her stay: she passed the night in fighting off the fever phantasies that beset her; in holding herself up out of the depths of delirium into which, every moment, she seemed about to fall.

If she were going to give way now, to have a fever, or to be mad, what would be the use of it all? What would be the use of it all? This she kept asking herself.

In the morning, she found that her mother’s name was written in the little book her father had laid on her pillow: she kept it as a sacred treasure. Some day she might be able to use it, she thought; but not now, not yet.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SEARCH.

LADY WINSTAY went home in fear and trembling. She found, however, that Mr. Hilhouse had not returned to the Castle; that, therefore, her husband, at present, knew nothing of what had happened. Mr. Hilhouse did not appear that night, neither for many nights nor days; greatly to her ladyship's relief, who meanwhile gave her own version of affairs to her lord.

On going to Bramblebridge Cove, Luke Fay had found that an old fisherman, whose hut was on the beach, who was a distant relation of his wife's, and had always been dotingly fond of Marian, had disappeared, he and his boat. The night before his boat had been safely drawn up on the shore with the others; in the morning, when the earliest sailor went down to the Cove, it was gone, and the old man himself missing. A heavy ground-swell, only then beginning to subside, made the boatmen shake their heads at the thought of a feeble old fellow like Mark Piers having put to sea alone.

Mr. Hilhouse learnt this from Luke, whom he met just after he left the Hall. In consequence of this information he visited all the fishing villages on the coast, on either side the Cove, for a considerable distance; inquired of all chance sailors and fishermen he encountered, and questioned the men at all the preventive stations in the districts. He obtained only the most conflicting and unsatisfactory tidings.

At this time hardly a night passed in which, during his short and troubled sleep, Mr. Hilhouse did not see Marian drowned—Marian lying dead out upon the sands, seaweed tangled in her clothes and among her shining hair.

When further search and inquiry along the coast seemed wholly useless, he pursued the same on land, at the inns and coach-offices, at wayside cottages and farms. Once or twice he believed himself to be at last on the right track, but

believed this only to be disappointed ; finding, indeed, an old man and a young girl, but not Marian and her uncle. When a month had been passed in this vain quest, he gave up hope that his efforts would be anything but vain. During that month, both in the local and in the London papers, advertisement after advertisement had appeared, worded cautiously and yet containing entreaty and passionate appeal : entreaty and appeal over which many wondered, some scoffed, but that never met the eyes for which they were intended. It was indeed hardly likely that they should ; an old man who could not read, and a young girl ignorant of the use of this medium of communication, were the last persons to be reached in such a way. It was a forlorn hope, and it failed ; as other hopes that had seemed less forlorn had failed.

When Mr. Hilhouse returned to the neighbourhood—which he did because to do so seemed less like giving Marian up than to live elsewhere or to go abroad would have done—he found the poor father and mother settled down, in a dull, hopeless sort of way, to their old manner of life : the old life, with all the light, beauty, and sweetness taken from it, and only the toil and heaviness of it left.

Mr. Hilhouse had taken all search into his own hands ; they had nothing to do but to wait : and they had waited with that dreary patience of ebbing hope which seems to drain out the soul's life.

Now and then, some careless or malicious hand giving them to drink of the gall and wormwood of neighbouring gossip, they were roused to keener suffering ; but this was not often. As time went on they began to settle to the conviction that Marian and the old man were both drowned ; how else could the loss of the boat be accounted for ? If they had landed anywhere they could not have carried the boat with them. Yet again, the boatmen said that, *for certain*, if they had been drowned, the wind and tide being as they were at the time, the bodies, and the wreck of the boat, must have been driven ashore.

"Better believe her drowned, than believe such things as the neighbours speak about," Luke Fay said to Mr. Hilhouse, the first time they met after Mr. Hilhouse had returned from his fruitless search.

"What may the neighbours say?" he asked, fiercely. "Who dare say harm of innocent Marian?"

"Foul tongues will blacken the cleanest," answered Luke, moodily: "indeed she must have been a heartless baggage at the best, to leave us like this, to wear our hearts out for a word or a sign: yet God forgive me saying so, if the poor wench is drowned."

"God forgive you, indeed, for a heartless father!" cried poor Mrs. Fay, looking at him with anger burning up her tears.

"We're fallen upon evil days: evil days and bitter, you see," said Luke, with a dreary smile. "Even my old woman is turning against me."

"But what is it that the neighbours say?" demanded Mr. Hilhouse.

"Idle tales, sir, that her father should be the last to heed to!" answered Mrs. Fay. "About a man seen at Marian's window that night. People say it was the young artist-gentleman who lodged at Bramblebridge, a while ago; somebody says that somebody met him, or somebody like him, in the Deerhurst road that day. Idle tales like this, sir! It's these things that break a mother's heart, sir, to have my girl's good name lied away. Marian! Marian! come back and tell them it's all false!" She threw her apron over her head and began to sob. Presently she uncovered her face, dried her eyes and said, "If Marian's ghost were to come to me to-night and tell me she was pure as when she left me, and that it well-nigh broke her heart to go away, I couldn't believe it surer than I believe it now. And I think shame of any one who knew her—all the greater shame if it's her own father—and yet can have half a thought of harm about her: I think shame of them, I do! You always was hard upon her Luke!"

"In loving her as the apple of my eye ! so as I couldn't bear speck nor flaw upon her ! " said the poor man, bitterly.

Mr. Hilhouse was brooding over his last interview with young Anson, recalling his taunting tone and words ; but he roused himself now. Grasping Mrs. Fay's hand, he murmured,—

"Your judgment is as just as it is loving. If ever a woman was stainless in thought, word, and deed, Marian was and *is*—whether she be in heaven or still on this earth."

With that he took his leave and walked back to the Castle.

Not only had Mr. Hilhouse returned to the neighbourhood, but he was now living at the Castle again, till Marian should return, or something should happen to make him sure of her fate.

Believing, as he did, that Lady Winstay was the sole cause of Marian's disappearance—of Marian's death, therefore, if indeed she had been drowned ; which he did not, could not believe—it was strange he should endure to live under the same roof with her. But he did endure it : he was used to her ; and she knew how, even now, to make herself in a manner necessary to him. She had humbled herself in the dust at his feet ; had pleaded her motives as her excuse. What motive could she have had but the wish to serve him ? There was a twist in her nature, perhaps, that made her take perverted views of things : a moral blindness, perhaps, that made her do wrong when she most desired to do right ; made her injure those whom she most longed to serve. She was ready to own this, to own anything against herself if only he would own that her life had been one long devotion to his interests, as she had been able to see them. All this and more, so skilful was she, she almost made him believe that she believed. While she was well nigh as wily as Vivien, he was no wiser, though less simple, than Merlin. Coldly and contemptuously he forgave her, negatively, by suffering her presence, and forbearing to betray her to Lord Winstay.

Lady Winstay's hope of a marriage between her cousin

and Esterel began to revive : her belief that Esterel loved him, or easily could be induced to love him, also revived ; but she determined to change her tactics.

“ He has loved before and he will love again,” she was fond of saying to herself. “ If he had known poor little Marian for years, he might have been faithful to her for years ; as it is, the impression cannot be deep. In time, he will come to wonder what her charm for him could have been. Meanwhile, I must be careful not to rouse his obstinacy by letting him see that I wish the intercourse with Esterel revived.”

Lady Winstay seldom spoke of Esterel ; but one day, when her name had occurred quite naturally, she said, with pretended carelessness,—

“ By-the-by, Herbert, I am sorry to wound your vanity, but I fancy I was mistaken about Esterel’s feelings towards you. I do not believe she could have taken the news of your engagement so quietly if she had cared for you.”

“ I have no doubt you were mistaken ! I always told you you were,” Mr. Hilhouse answered. Yet he did doubt ; and, moreover, he felt piqued, as she wished him to do, that Lady Winstay had seen fit to alter her opinion.

Wise Lady Winstay ! all the more powerful in your wisdom that you smother it under so much frivolous foolishness.

Lady Winstay’s “ wise ” treatment ; Lord Winstay’s cold and covert ridicule of this “ romantic love-affair,”—Lord Winstay had little sympathy with “ that kind of thing ;” perhaps his individual experience had shown him that the romance of unequal marriages is apt to be entirely on one side, —and more than all, Marian’s absence and unbroken silence, so trying at such a time to his vanity as well as to better and deeper feelings, began to tell upon the mood in which her lover recalled her image.

Young Anson’s mischievous words were often in his mind ; he even, sometimes, dared to think of Marian as no one who had known her could be excused for thinking of her.

CHAPTER XXV.

ESTEREL AND MARIAN'S LOVER MEET.

For many days after Marian's disappearance, Esterel's first thought each morning as she rose was, "Marian will be found to-day."

When she had sent the poor child away, she had not contemplated any such search as was being made : now she did not think it possible that Marian could long hide herself.

Nor would it, perhaps, have been possible, had not circumstances of which she did not even know, helped to cover the poor girl's flight with secrecy.

When day after day passed, and week after week ; when the search had been abandoned and no Marian, nor any trace of her been found, Esterel began to believe that Marian was dead, had been drowned that morning in the bay. Mr. Downside, whenever the topic was touched upon in Esterel's presence—which, as it was the talk of the neighbourhood, he could not always prevent—insisted urgently on the improbability that this should have been the case, and that no sign of Marian, nor of her companion, should have been washed on shore. But in her heart of hearts Esterel began to believe that Marian was drowned, and to call herself a murderess. Having ever entertained the thought of suicide, it seemed strange she could bear to live now, when her nights were nights of agony, her days days of despair ; but she was waiting.

Her first meeting with Mr. Hilhouse—how long it seemed in coming !—was an accidental one. From mere restlessness of dread, or from the excitement of secret hope which lent her false strength, Esterel wandered about the gardens, grounds, and woods constantly now ; penetrating farther and deeper into the wood than she ever used to venture. In one of these wanderings, quite suddenly she came upon Mr. Hilhouse : he was sitting at the root of that tree where, on the May-day

that seemed so long ago, he had found Marian with her lap full of flowers.

All the spring flowers were faded now, even the latest; the deep hush, the full foliage told of that time when nature seems to pause on perfection, nothing remaining to do, waiting for the time of undoing.

Mr. Hilhouse sat with his face hidden in his hands: he had not seen Esterel. Her first impulse was to fly; to hide herself anywhere: anywhere out of sight of his sorrow. At that moment a squirrel sitting in the tree above him, which seemed to have grown accustomed to his silent, stirless presence, noted and took fright at this fresh intruder; climbing higher it made a rustling in the boughs. At this noise Mr. Hilhouse looked up and saw Esterel. He would have taken some pains to avoid such a meeting; but as it was inevitable he resolved to make the best of it. Possessing a keen sense of the ludicrous, and a strong dislike to furnish a subject for ridicule, he was ill-pleased to appear thus, in the character of a lover lamenting a mistress who had deserted him. Rising quickly, he met Esterel with an ordinary greeting, and began to speak to her on ordinary topics, expressing his surprise at meeting her so far from home, his hope that she had recovered from the ill effects of her accident, and so on; turning, meanwhile, towards the path leading to the Hall.

But in Esterel's gentle, unconsciously caressing manner, in the soft pity of her beautiful eyes, he found something soothing to his grief and to his vanity. Insensibly he was led on to speak of Marian.

"You know there is news of her, if I may call it news?" he asked.

Poor Esterel! How her heart leaped.

"If it is anything fresh, I have not heard it," she replied.

"It can hardly be called news of Marian; it gives no clue to where she is gone: though if it had come sooner, it might have done. All it does, coming now, is to assure me that, as I always believed, Marian is not drowned."

"Assures you that Marian is not drowned!" Esterel echoed his words with such an accent of heartfelt gladness as reproached his own dull, thankless tone. Her eyes shone upon him full of joy: of course he could not know how heavy a burden his words had taken from her conscience.

"You thought, then, that she had perished?" he asked.

"I feared it must be so, otherwise it did not seem to me possible that she should not have been found. I am very glad: more glad than I can tell!"

"Thank you, thank you!" he said. "No doubt the circumstances which baffled me, and made all my search useless, was, that the old man, Mark Piers—with whom we must believe that Marian went away—the weather looking threatening, and the sea rolling heavily (as I remember well was the case), put in to shore again almost immediately; before, as it seems, his boat had been remarked by any one. He put in to shore at a spot he was only too well acquainted with, a smuggler's haunt. Here it seems that, short of money probably, he sold his boat (which I find he had named "the Marian") to some of his comrades, bidding them paint out her name. This was done, and the boat not happening to be needed, was drawn up into a cave which the men use as a storehouse, and kept there unused for some weeks. It was only yesterday, when the preventive men were down upon the smugglers, that some one recognized the boat as old Mark's, in spite of her name having been painted out. Beyond the fact that Mark sold them the boat, no information can be extracted from the men: of who was in the boat with Mark they know, or pretend to know, nothing: they pretend to have seen only the old man, who told them he was in a scrape and must move on a bit, but hoped to be able to buy his boat back when he turned up again. Nothing can be more unsatisfactory than all this; affording, as it does, not the slightest clue to Marian's fate, nor to her intentions."

"But affording sure proof, any way, that Marian was not

drowned. The old man must have left her hidden somewhere, while he drove his bargain."

"Sure proof, as you say, that she is not drowned; but that, as I said before, I never believed, and there is no proof that she escaped *alone* with this old man."

"You mean——?" asked Esterel, dubiously.

"I do not know what I mean, nor what to think. That story about the man seen at her window, the recollection of how that young fellow Anson was always hanging about, and the insufficiency, as it seems to me on calmer reflection, of motive furnished by what passed between Marian and my cousin——"

"You do not mean that you doubt Marian's honour?" Esterel interrupted: "that you think she escaped with some other lover?"

Involuntarily her eyes blazed with scorn: not exactly scorn of Mr. Hilhouse. Her thought was of how easily men could learn to doubt where they loved, if he could so soon doubt such an innocent child as Marian.

"You do not think it could be so, I see," he said, as he met that look. "I thank you for the pure and noble womanly championship to which your face testifies. I hope I do not doubt Marian's honour. But I am sadly tossed to and fro: I do not know what to think. Marian—the remembrance of this haunts me now—would give me no promise. No doubt she had other lovers. Possibly she was perplexed in choice."

Those last words were spoken, as we all perhaps speak words sometimes, for the sake of hearing them contradicted.

"Marian had other lovers; among them a young Jacob Stubbs, whom her father greatly favoured, and who, I used to be half afraid, might carry off my pretty pupil," Esterel answered.

These simple words galled Mr. Hilhouse: he bit his lip. Though he loved the gamekeeper's daughter, though he knew this young man had been her suitor, he did not like to hear a "mere country bumpkin," as he supposed young Stubbs to be, numbered among his rivals by Esterel.

"Do you mean that you think Marian ever loved young Stubbs?" he asked, in a tone of intense disgust. "I recollect that she once earnestly defended him from a laughing accusation of mine."

"I am sure she did not love him: like him as one who had been a childish play-fellow, I think she did. Let who may have loved Marian, I am sure that she was heart-whole when you saw her first. Had it been otherwise, I should have known."

"Yet I fancy your manner implies a reservation. Is it so?"

"No," she answered.

"Forgive my urgency: something, I feel sure, you are keeping back for fear of giving me pain. Be candid, I entreat; indeed, that will show the truest kindness. What were you thinking that you did not say?"

"Nothing, or, if anything, only——"

"Pray speak freely. I beg this of you as an especial favour."

"I was thinking, then," said Esterel—the words pressed from her by his urgency, were uttered softly, slowly, as she looked upon the ground—"I was thinking that my only doubt of Marian could be, not that she loved any one else, but that she did not love at all—except in a childish and imperfect fashion. If it had been otherwise, what circumstances, what persuasion, what compulsion short of personal violence, can you imagine that would have had power to drive her from you? I can imagine none that could have done so, had she loved you."

Esterel spoke, undesignedly, and what really had been her thought. Mr. Hilhouse was silent: the implied flattery of those words sank deep. Slighted, or beginning to believe that he had been slighted, by one woman, he was peculiarly open to the flattery of another: it seemed just the balm his heart desired.

"Of one thing," Esterel continued, without looking up, "I am as sure as I am of my own——" "honour" she would have said; but she paused, mocked at herself, and asked, aloud, "How can I affirm anything? Of what can I ever be sure?"

"Of my warmest friendship and admiration you may, at least, be always sure!" Mr. Hilhouse answered, speaking on the

impulse of an unguarded moment, as he looked at the delicate, downcast face.

"I do not see that I can well be sure of that," Esterel retorted, with a quiet dignity that veiled bitter incredulity. "I was going to say that in Marian's purity and truth nothing can, nor shall, shake my belief!"

Mr. Hilhouse suddenly took Esterel's hand and raised it to his lips. As an excuse for the action, he said,—

"Marian used to love to do that: that was her way of thanking you; let it be mine. It was very pretty to see her do it!" he added, musingly.

He could not, had he tried, have inflicted on Esterel a keener pang, a sharper stab of pain, after having caused her a thrill of pleasure, than he did when he followed that action by those words. He sighed, relinquishing the hand he had taken, and said,—

"You have a woman's, a good, true woman's instinctive, unwavering faith in faithfulness; while I have a world-worn man's knowledge of the fickleness and deceitfulness of things within and things without, to confuse and weaken my belief in what is better and higher. I, too, theoretically believe that Marian must necessarily continue good, pure, and true. But my fate is a hard one: if it is so, if she is so worthy of love, it seems to me that I must conclude as you do, that her love was not mine. Had it been so she could hardly have found adequate motives for going away."

"I do not say that Marian did not love you; I only say, if you must doubt her, doubt her love for you rather than doubt her stainless purity; for indeed," here Esterel looked up with tears in her eyes, "Marian is so pure that I do not see how one of God's holy angels could be more spotless."

To this he answered nothing: he caught that glowing, tearful look of Esterel's, and then bent his own gaze upon the ground. Was his want of faith rebuked by the fulness of hers? Or was it no thought of Marian that was stirring his heart just then?

Going straight towards the Hall, they passed across one of the paths leading to the cottage. Esterel looked down it. At the garden gate Mrs. Fay was standing : shading her eyes with her hand, she looked after the young lady from the Hall and Marian's lover.

Presently they met Mr. Downside : always uneasy when Esterel was long absent, yet aware of her dislike, almost amounting to a mania, to be watched or followed, he was prowling about near the house, in hope of seeing her soon return. Meeting Mr. Hilhouse, he, in the most cordial way, pressed him to remain to dinner. Mr. Hilhouse hesitated, and looked at his watch ; he could not be at the Castle till long past the dinner-hour : he had no reason to give for declining Mr. Downside's invitation : yesterday he would have declined it, reason or no reason ; to-day he was glad to find no excuse for doing so : he was listless, and any change was welcome—he accepted, and stayed.

After Mr. Hilhouse had left, while he was riding towards the Castle, through the night, on a borrowed horse, (which he was to ride back next day,) Esterel did what she had done more frequently than ever during the weeks that had elapsed since Marian's disappearance—a practice that told upon her health and tried her brain greatly—she left her bed when the house was asleep to lock herself into her mother's rooms. She kept there a vigil of a curious kind : curious, indeed, for it was hard to say which was the most passionate, her penitence for her sin, or her supplication for the success of that sin ; and curious, too, was the nature of that supplication from its strange mingling of superstition and incredulity.

This night, lying on the ground in abject humiliation, her constant cry was, “ Pity me, for my passion's sake ; though I am false, that is true ! Pity me for my passion's sake, mother in heaven ! Pity me for my passion's sake, and win me pardon for my sin.”

Poor Esterel ! grounding her hope of pardon on this quicksand ! hating herself for her sin, yet clinging to her sin !

telling her prayers on the devil's rosary! Is it not self-evident that prayers for the *success of sin* could not be offered at the throne of Truth and Righteousness? Loving with a love that could never prove itself true love, except at the martyr's stake; where, self and sin perishing in the voluntarily-kindled fire, that which was spirit and pure love might ascend as incense towards heaven. Poor Esterel!

CHAPTER XXVI.

BITTER-SWEET.

FOR Mr. Downside as well as for Esterel, this time of waiting was a time of torture. Instead of being drawn closer to him, as he, perhaps, had fondly hoped, since she had learnt to regard him as a conspirator, Esterel shunned him. In spite of herself she more and more dreaded, and at the same time more and more despised him. To be alone with him—that secret of which they never spoke between them, that secret, knowing which he could not be ignorant of the other secret of her unrequited love—was almost intolerable to Esterel. His mild and melancholy gaze, all his thousand little acts of tenderness, exasperated her so that sometimes she would be forced to rise suddenly and leave the room, no longer able to bear his presence.

To see and feel this was Mr. Downside's heavy punishment, and it was heavily borne: his slight figure took a more decided stoop, his hair whitened rapidly, and the look in his eyes, which some of his friends called his ghost-seeing look, became more striking, and was there more constantly.

Mr. Hilhouse, after that first visit, was now again often at the Hall. Shaken and unsettled by the sudden blow that had fallen upon him, craving sympathy and, perhaps, also—though he did not recognize to himself this craving—the soothing

balm of delicately-implied flattery, Lady Winstay's hardness and lightness drove him to Esterel, and enhanced the charm of Esterel's manner; its dreamy sadness and quiet intensity exactly suiting his present mood. Quiet, for when he was with her a calm fell on her; a brief content enwrapped her: conscience was lulled to sleep, and remorse lost all its power to sting: of the reaction afterwards he, of course, knew nothing. Mr. Hilhouse yielded himself up to the consoling charm of this friendship; this close and warm friendship, for a sweet and lovely woman.

What was to be the end, for him and for her, of this pleasant indulgence, he did not trouble himself to think. He chose to imagine that just what he needed, and no more, Esterel gave him: he did not watch himself nor her; with a lazy, luxurious abandonment he allowed himself to drift.

What was to be the end for Esterel—if an end to their intercourse came—an indifferent spectator might have prophesied, marking the ever-increasing fragility of her whole aspect. Mr. Downside, no indifferent spectator, did mark this. It was curious how little her beauty was marred by the wear and tear of passion: the delicate outline of her features seemed to be fretted finer, and her flesh to grow more and more transparent, letting the white inner fire shine out more strongly, while her eyes glowed larger and darker. She had left off wearing dresses of rich and warm colours—colours which she loved instinctively, and which, lending a faint glow to her whiteness, had taken from her complexion somewhat of its diaphanous bloodlessness. She wore always now such colours as she had heard Mr. Hilhouse commend for women's wear—pale grey, soft lavender, faint dove colour, or pure white.

Days and weeks came and went; Mr. Hilhouse came and went; and with him came and went Esterel's life. I do not pretend to know why she loved him: but, look round and see if in ninety-nine cases in a hundred you can give a reason for love—can say why this woman loves this man, that man that woman.

Mr. Hilhouse went and came, and noticed little or nothing of the change working slowly as surely in his "sweet friend." Till one morning—whether that day he came with quickened senso and keener sight, and if so by what quickened and made more keen? or whether the change in Esterel was that morning more apparent, it is impossible to tell—it seemed to him that then his eyes opened suddenly to see Esterel as she was. Legends of olden time, of white witch-women who by night took other shape; legends of times older than olden, concerning women in whose veins ran white and liquid fire, instead of blood, occurred to his mind. But Esterel's face softened so for him, that for him there could be nothing fearful in its beauty; these phantasies were chased away by sweeter fancies, his heart kindling with the pity near akin to love. When he was alone with Esterel he questioned her. Was she ill? Did she suffer pain in the poor arm she had hurt some months ago? No, she answered, she was not ill. Sometimes her arm was painful, especially now since the weather was growing cold; but such pain as that was nothing: nothing to mind.

"But there is something I do mind very much," he said. "To see my sweet, kind friend look so—I cannot use the common word 'ill,' and I do not know what word to substitute for it. The look I mean, beautiful as it is, is not a look I like to see on the face of one I want to keep here, on this earth."

His voice was low and soft; perhaps he hardly knew how much his eyes expressed. He could not remove them from her face, which seemed to him to have a strange fascination of unearthly beauty. She had looked into his eyes, and now hers drooped; but he gazed on.

"This earth is a weary place," she sighed out. "It is strange we should want to keep those we care for here, where there is no rest—no rest."

Then fell a silence, hiding inward conflict. Mr. Hilhouse was sitting close to Esterel, so close he could easily have

enclosed her with his arm. A new desire, a strong desire, no mere selfish desire, came over him. He longed to draw that fragile form towards him, to hold it close; to press that white face against his breast, to make that golden-crowned head lean its wealth there; then to ask her if so she could learn to love the earth, and to find rest upon it. Had the silence lasted a little longer, this desire might have grown irresistible; but Esterel broke it:—had she no feeling of what thoughts had filled it?—saying,—

“No news of Marian this day, more than any of the other days, or you would have told me. I grow weary of asking, and you are weary of answering ‘no.’ I will leave off asking you; you will tell me when news comes.”

“‘When news comes!’ you think it must, then, some day?” he asked, rousing himself.

“Some day, I suppose it must: but it is very strange.”

“What is very strange?”

“That she *can* keep away, keep silent so long: so long, so long.” Indeed the time did seem long, wearily long to Esterel.

“She did not love me: of that I begin to be sure.”

“She did,” Esterel was impelled to say. “How could she help it? Not to have loved you would have been to be ungrateful; Marian could not be ungrateful.”

“I wanted love: not gratitude, but love.”

“To some it might seem as if instead you wanted gratitude: not love, but gratitude. Yet what is one and what the other, who can tell? Where one ends and one begins, who can tell? and whether love is everything or nothing, only a dream, or the only reality; whether it is life or death, or heaven or hell, who can say?”

She spoke faster than usual, and with a sort of recklessness; trying to cover the rashness, as she thought it, of the first few words.

“Love, like sunshine, must be felt to be known,” he said: “but it is not as harmless as sunshine.” He sighed; but

whether over the sorrow of a lost love, or with the prescience of a dawning trouble of love to come, possibly he could not have told.

"There was something I had to say to you to-day," he spoke reflectively, after another of those dangerous silences. "I remember! I have a favour to ask you. You have not been to see poor Mrs. Fay since Marian left; will you do so?"

"I do not think my going there can be any use, any comfort to her!" answered Esterel, shrinking inwardly.

"But you will go if I ask it?" he pleaded. "I will tell you why I ask it. She has, at different times, expressed a strong wish to see you. At first she seemed to have a sort of infatuation about you; she thought you could explain all, and set all right. This was when you were laid up after your unfortunate accident. She got over that, and has not mentioned you lately, till to-day. I came that way, and I called in as I passed: it was a long time since I had seen the poor woman. It seemed to me as if something had renewed her grief. She said she had such a longing to see you. Did I think you would come? You will, will you not? Why not let me have the pleasure of the walk there with you; it is a bright cheery day out of doors. Will you go with me now?"

"No; oh, no, not now. But to-morrow I promise you I will go."

"Thanks, thanks. I know by my own experience what comfort it will be to the poor woman to talk over her trouble with you. If all the pain could have been mine, it would have been worth while to suffer it all to be so sweetly consoled as I have been by you." He was going when he said this; the hand Esterel held to him in leave-taking he retained longer than was needful.

"What a hand it is!" he exclaimed. "Look at it as it lies on mine, like—— I am at fault for a simile. I was going to say like a snow-flake on the brown earth; but I don't like

that simile, lest it should melt off mine as a snowflake might—which is not what I want.”

“It is hardly so unsubstantial,” answered Esterel.

Mr. Hilhouse dropped the fairy fingers quickly as he caught himself remembering “poor Marian’s” hands with something of disparagement. Though neither large nor ill-formed, they were not, of course, such marvels of fine material and delicate modelling as were Esterel’s; they were serviceable hands, clever little hands, willing and able for all woman’s work, a little browned and hardened, but dear little hands for all that.

When Mr. Hilhouse was gone, Esterel smiled to herself: if you had seen her then you might have called her witch, or worse; yet you would have been wrong if you had not pitied her. In that smile was the germ of all bitterness: it was a smile of triumph: but of such triumph as, even while we sip it first, our hearts condemn as savourless and worse than failure. Where is the joy of conquest if, at the moment of success, we feel the worthlessness of what is gained? As yet, it was only a dim foreboding that she might feel this that was on her. She fell into deep thought. When she roused herself, she whispered, “Am I going to leave off loving him when he comes to love me?—to leave off loving him when he leaves off mourning Marian? No, no, no! Worthy or worthless, I love him! If he were all good, all noble, how should I dare love him? Let his crime be learning to love me, soon or late, and I will forgive him.”

That evening Mr. Hilhouse said, addressing his cousin, in a more kindly tone than he had used since Marian went away,—

“Rosa! you must persuade Mr. Downside to bring his daughter here for change. She is looking frightfully, or, to be more strictly correct, exquisitely delicate. I do not think I shall be here when they come: I must go to London soon now; but that need make no difference.”

“I shall be delighted to have them if they like to come,”

answered Lady Winstay ; “ but ”—there she made a great show of hesitation and reluctance to speak, and then asked, “ may I venture to speak my mind to my lord the Sultan, who has been so grizzly and grim to his poor slave of late that she has trembled in his presence ? ”

“ Speak, foolish Fatima,” he answered, not without foreknowledge of the sort of thing he should hear.

“ According to my folly, I speak ; hear according to your wisdom. My trifling weather-cock of a mind has shifted to its first point. If you are in London, Esterel will get no good from being here.”

Having spoken, and darted one shrewd look at her hearer, Lady Winstay fluttered away.



CHAPTER XXVII.

AN ORDEAL.

MR. HILHOUSE could hardly have subjected Esterel to a more painful ordeal than he did when he made her promise to go to the cottage. She spent the night in penitential vigil, and the morning found her wrought up to a sort of desperate resolution to go through with what she had begun. As yet she had not been driven, while acting her cruel lie, to the telling of one direct untruth. Her perverted conscience noted this with superstitious complacency ; the same superstitious tendency suggested that to do so now would be to break the charm, and to begin the undoing of what had been so painfully done. But to-day she must lie, if necessary : it was too late to pause or to turn upon her road. Confession would be the double confession of intolerable shame—the shame of unsuccessful treachery and of unrequited love.

Esterel desired to visit Mrs. Fay early, earlier than there could be any danger of meeting Mr. Hilhouse at the cottage,

or in the neighbourhood. She was ready and was hurrying off, when she chanced to meet Mr. Downside in the hall: at least she thought the meeting one of chance, but in truth he had watched for it, having found some cause of fresh anxiety in her look and manner that morning.

"You must not go beyond the gardens, my love," he said; "there is every sign of a gathering storm. The wind has dropped suddenly, there is an awsome lull. You are not going beyond the gardens, I hope?"

"I am going to the cottage."

"Ah!" They exchanged looks; then followed his question, "Why?"

"Mrs. Fay wants to see me, and I promised to go to see her to-day."

"Have you reflected? Come in here for a few moments."

He opened the door of his library: she followed him in.

The interview was short, and they both spoke below their breath. It was the first time they spoke plainly. Mr. Downside made an agonized appeal to Esterel; an appeal that had trembled on his whitened lips a thousand times, and remained unspoken. He besought her to send for Marian home, and that she herself would go away with him, out of sound of any whisper of reproach or shame—out of sight of any one who knew her.

"I cannot send for Marian home," she answered, "but I will tell Mrs. Fay why Marian went—if afterwards I may die: put myself away out of sight or sound of this world. That I should confess this and live is just impossible: and oh," she said, clasping her hands, "I *want* to taste life."

Mr. Downside groaned.

"To live would not be impossible. I would pour out all my life to sweeten yours; and," he added, with the timidity of unconfirmed faith, "nothing that God sends is impossible to be borne."

"He has let it be possible that we should die."

"As He has let all crime—murder, as self-murder, be

possible—that we might overcome temptation. Few men have suffered more than I, yet I have borne to live.”

“You have never had one fear before you that I have always before me,” Esterel answered, moving towards the door as she spoke. “Some end will come, perhaps; not any end that I can foresee,” she added. “I must go now and fulfil my promise.” At the door she turned, went back to him for a moment: and, putting her hand on his shoulder, looking pitifully into his face, she said, “I wish you cared nothing for me! Try not to love me: if you bind me to life by your love, you bind me to constant torture.”

She was gone before he could answer; he sat there, his head buried in his hands, and forgot her present danger from the gathering storm, in looking on and shuddering at what might come.

She thought to herself as she moved away,—“Perhaps I shall have to live, and in madness suffer a thousand deaths for his sake! Why cannot I draw in all my being into myself?”

Hurrying along the road, tossed and torn by contending passions, Esterel was at the cottage before she had come to any oneness with herself as to how to act and speak when there. The house-door stood wide; she shunned Marian’s desolate parlour, and went into the kitchen. At first she thought that, too, was empty, but presently, in the darkest corner, she saw Mrs. Fay, sitting with her apron thrown over her head.

What Mr. Hilhouse had thought was true; something had happened yesterday to revive the poor mother’s grief. Some malicious gossip had been repeated to her, or some ill-boding story had reached her. She had been thinking or dreaming of Marian all the night, and now still sought darkness to continue her sad, dreamy thinking.

Esterel spoke twice before Mrs. Fay heard her. When she uncovered her face and saw who was her visitor, she burst into a passion of tears.

Esterel sat down beside her and took her hand, saying to

herself as she did so, "How hard my heart must be! How hard my heart must be!" For she felt strangely unmoved by these tears. They sat so some time, neither of them speaking.

Suddenly Mrs. Fay wiped her eyes, and stilled her sobs. Before Esterel knew what was about to happen, Marian's mother was kneeling on the stones at her feet.

It seemed to Esterel that all the blood in her body retreated to her heart then, and turned to stone there as she waited for what would follow.

"Dear lady!" cried Mrs. Fay, wringing Esterel's hand in hers, "if you know anything of where our girl is—if Marian told you anything, or if any way you have come to know anything—tell me, tell me. You can't be silent and let a mother's heart break; and mine is breaking. I'm just wild with grief, and with want of rest or sleep, and strange fancies come to me. If you know where our girl is, tell me. We'll do anything to serve you; we'd go away to Marian, me and Luke, and never be heard of here any more, and ——" she lowered her voice to a whisper, and looked up into Esterel's face—Esterel's stony, unbetraying face—wildly, adding, "*we'd never, never let him know. We'd never claim him for Marian's lover. All your life you should live in peace from us!* As you ever loved the mother that bore you, tell me, do you know where our girl is? Oh! Miss Esterel, dear lady, I loved your mother! For your mother's sake, tell me!"

Just at that moment the storm which had been muttering about in the distance, seemed to break right over the house. A vivid flash of lightning lit up the cottage kitchen and those two pale faces: the walls vibrated to the violence of the peal of thunder; the wind roared by. Then followed a pause of awful stillness.

Mrs. Fay did not move her imploring eyes. Esterel looked down into them unflinchingly, as she said to herself, "No need to lie! A good omen: no need to lie!" Then aloud, "I do not know where Marian is. Get up, Mrs. Fay: grief has

indeed made you wild. I repeat, I know no more than you do where Marian is."

Mrs. Fay rose and crept to a seat; there she sat rocking herself to and fro. Esterel's look and Esterel's tone had cowed her; she did not dare doubt that simple affirmation; she felt that she had taken an unwarrantable liberty, implying what she had in those whispered words.

"I'm losing my wits, I think, ma'am," she said, presently. "This grief has made me an old woman before my time."

They watched the storm a while in silence.

"It seems to me, Mrs. Fay," Esterel said, slowly, by-and-by, "that you grieve too much; as if Marian were dead, or worse! Marian, you know, is a good girl, and she has the old man to protect her. He had some money, you remember, for his boat; and Marian, you've often told me, is such a beautiful worker, that she could get a good living with ease any day. It is hard for you, of course, to have Marian away, and not to know where she is; but, no doubt, she will come back soon and explain everything, and I am quite sure she will have no wrong nor sin of her own to confess. Meanwhile, what is it you dread and grieve over so much?"

"The neighbours are talking away my girl's good name, Miss Esterel! Even Luke, whiles, thinks harm of her. All because of that story about the man seen at the window! A false story! A wicked lie!" the poor woman said, passionately. "But Luke believes it."

"May it not have been the old fisherman come to call Marian?" As Esterel asked this, a sudden wonder filled her as to why this had never been asked before.

"'Tall and slight, and wrapped in a long cloak,' the wicked story goes; Mark is little and bent nearly double, and never had a long cloak in his life. But, even if it could have been Mark, *why* should she run away? It isn't as if I, or father, had been worrying her to do anything she didn't want to do: some of the neighbours say that, and they may say that: we don't mind that, but it wasn't so!"

"Do you think that she loved Mr. Hilhouse? Do you not think she was afraid of him—afraid to marry him, even before what Lady Winstay said to her, and afraid to tell him she could not marry him? That would have been natural enough, you know. For this she might have gone away."

"I can't tell! I did feel sure she loved him, but now I can't tell. Of course, she was a bit timid of him. In my time, good, modest young girls always were a bit timid of a man they loved, if he was worth anything. Things are altered now, they tell me; but my Marian was, of course, a bit timid of a lover who is a gentleman, and so much older, wiser, and graver than she! Still I'm sure I thought she loved him: I'm sure I thought she did."

"If she did, you will have her back the sooner; she could not keep away long." Though another terrific volley shook the cottage, Esterel rose to go. "You will have her back, safe and well," she repeated, "I feel sure you will. Meanwhile, I suppose you believe, as Marian would have believed, that God can protect her there, wherever she is, as well as here."

"The clergyman has said that to me a many times," the poor woman answered, listlessly. "Thank you for minding me of it. I forget everything sadly since Marian went away. Thank you kindly for coming to see me, Miss Esterel. You're looking but poorly, dear young lady, and I never thought to ask about your arm. You can't go yet," she said, as Esterel hurried to the porch, not able to bear any more; "indeed you can't, ma'am. It would be tempting Providence to go among the trees in this storm."

"It is over, I think; the rain is falling now. Indeed, I must go."

In spite of most urgent entreaty, Esterel hurried away.

She did not even choose the shortest way home. When Mrs. Fay could no longer see her, she took one of the narrow paths that led deep into the wood, pushing on in the direction of the Fall. In this way she missed Mr. Downside, who,

roused by the first peal of thunder to the recollection that he had let her go out into the gathering storm, had followed her to the cottage.

Hurrying on through the wood, which now was hushed with an awful hush—now answered to the wind's scourge with terrific howl and roar, Esterel climbed to the Bramble Bridge; to the bramble-grown grey rock above the Fall, from which the mad Lady Maria had leapt, as the fall just below her leapt. She looked down upon the brawling, eddying current flowing darkly at the bottom of the deep chasm; the strong swift current carrying all things to the sea. It was a wild, ungovernable impulse, no premeditated resolve, that had brought Esterel here. Now she was here, she shrank back from the brink shuddering, afraid of herself: afraid lest some as ungovernable impulse should seize her and hurl her over. The water looked black and awful, the sharp rocks cruel: she would be dashed from point to point of those rocks, dying many deaths before those waters closed over her. Her flesh shrank; the dainty delicate flesh, it craved a softer, gentler death, if death at all.

Clinging to the stem of a scathed ash-tree that grew from the rock, and sinking down on the wet stone at its foot, overcome with fatigue, she looked down over the wild scene before her. Every now and then the wood, as one tree, was swayed by the wind; whitened, as if it foamed, by the fury of the storm. The tumult was maddening; between the frequent peals of thunder there was the unintermittent thunder of the Fall.

As she watched the play of the lightning, she said,—

“Yes, life must be worse than death: life with this gnawing at my heart: wicked as I am, God would smite me dead, were not life a greater punishment than death! Will this cruel pain always, always be here? If he holds me to him, strained tight in love, shall I feel it still? No, no, no; I will not believe it.”

Fearing the tumult might quite madden her if she stayed,

she began to descend. The way she had come, the spot where she had rested, had been comparatively sheltered: turning towards the Hall she met the full brunt of the storm. She was drenched to the skin, and half dead with fatigue, when she reached the gardens, and through them the house.

In the hall she found Mr. Hilhouse, just arrived: he had started for Bramblebridge early, the bearer of a note of invitation which he had requested Lady Winstay to write. Half way he had been surprised by the storm, and his horse had taken fright; he had had a perilous, adventurous ride, and consequently was in high spirits, in such a physical and mental glow as he had not known for months.

"My dear young lady! where have you been in this weather?" he exclaimed on seeing Esterel.

He seemed much touched when she explained that she had only been out to fulfil her promise: explained, as well as she could in her state of breathless exhaustion, as she leant against the oak-panelling.

"Only all the way to the cottage, in such weather!"

"It is no worse for me than for you!" she said, smiling faintly. "You have come much farther."

"A frail white lily can hardly stand the brunt of a storm like this, so well as a tougher, ruder thing," he said, laughing, yet with tenderness in his eyes and tone. Mr. Hilhouse insisted on himself removing Esterel's dripping cloak; while he fumbled with the fastenings, her maid, whose duty he was performing, preceded her mistress upstairs, to lay out dry garments ready for her. Mr. Hilhouse was clumsy; by his clumsiness he gave himself time to say several pretty things, expressive of his tender solicitude for this white lily, and his sorrow that the promise he had so rashly exacted should have exposed it to such perils of wind and weather. Something like the shining of a lily in the moonlight was the glow that came over Esterel's face as she listened.

A third drenched person meanwhile appeared—Mr. Downside. Inexpressibly relieved to see Esterel safe—for the worst

fears had tortured him when he found she had left the cottage before he reached it—he ventured to express nothing save his anxiety that she should at once go to her room.

Mr. Hilhouse took shelter at the Hall till evening, though the storm had passed over many hours before. When he returned to Southsand, he was the bearer of a note from Esterel, so tremulously written as hardly to be legible, accepting Lady Winstay's invitation. Mr. Hilhouse had pleaded for that acceptance, and had watched her while she wrote it, in a way that made Esterel feel that her triumph was at hand. At Bramblebridge, Mr. Hilhouse said nothing of his thought of soon going to London, nor did he again allude to it at the Castle.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

SUNSHINE AT SOUTHSAND.

How did Mr. Hilhouse reconcile his present conduct to his conscience? Perhaps he had no conscience to which to reconcile it.

Any indifferent spectator would have said that he was courting Miss Downside. Did he own this to himself? Had he, therefore, given up his affection for the gamekeeper's daughter? given up even hoping that she would return to him? given up, also, that pride of independence which had made him vow that he would never marry an heiress? This story does not attempt profound analysis of character or motive. Probably, Mr. Hilhouse did not ask himself these troublesome questions; probably, if he had resolved anything, it was "to be guided by circumstances; to let events follow their natural course."

Doubtless, many worse men than Mr. Hilhouse have lived and died "highly respected," while many better men may have come to a "bad end." He is not meant either for a

hero or a villain : if two women chose to regard him in the former light, that goes for nothing.

“Circumstances” and the “natural course of events,” having brought Esterel and Mr. Downside to Southsand Castle, threw Esterel and Mr. Hilhouse together constantly. “Circumstances,” that is, as contrived by Lady Winstay ; “the course of events,” as guided by Lady Winstay’s hand.

Her ladyship had gained wisdom by experience : her operations were more subtle and guarded than they would have been a few months back.

Mr. Hilhouse had gradually grown dependent on Esterel for all the sweetness and savour of life. For the present his work was abandoned ; his plans for the future hinged on contingencies. If he was sad, thinking of the past, he came to Esterel for sympathy : he was exacting, and she was generous, giving him all he asked, and more. If he was hopeful, looking to the future, he talked to Esterel of all his hopes and schemes, and never found her weary of listening. Each day drew these two closer : her being became more completely contained in his ; his interest in her grew more intimate, his admiration of her warmer, and their intercourse became a more confirmed habit.

The change from Bramblebridge to Southsand, the bracing sea-air, the abandonment of those night-vigils, the removal from scenes pervaded by painful and morbid associations, had a great effect on Esterel. The rose of health—a stainless white rose, but still a rose—began to bloom upon her cheek. That she, so wicked, could be so comparatively happy, was a marvel to Esterel. But even while she rejoiced, something always whispered, “Not for long : this cannot last for long.”

“My dear, how beautiful you look this morning !” Lady Winstay exclaimed one day, in genuine admiration. Esterel, just returned from a ride over the firm sands of the bay, through the clear bright autumn air, stood by Lady Winstay on the sea-wall walk.

“I must see if that hat will make me look half as

bewitching!" she said. "You must be the judges," she added, turning to Lord Winstay, Mr. Downside, and Mr. Hilhouse who stood near.

Removing Esterel's plumed riding hat to place it on her own head, Lady Winstay, by accident or design, pulled off the net that confined Esterel's hair. Lady Winstay had spoken of this wonderful hair often; now she seized this opportunity of exhibiting it. Shaking it out to the wind and the sun, so that it seemed to give out showers of golden fire, she laughed mischievously; clapping her hands when, as she let it go, it rippled down almost to Esterel's knee.

Esterel, standing there, half angry, half amused at Lady Winstay's folly, happily conscious of the homage paid to her beauty by the only eyes for whose homage she cared, looked innocent, girlish, and bewilderingly lovely. Wrapped in a mantle of golden sunshine, the sparkling sunny water breaking at her feet, nothing but sunshine could she see, nothing but sunshine did she feel; positive sunshine melting in the distance into an indefinite sunny haze. She laughed, a soft low laugh: it seemed to her as if her heart laughed involuntarily.

"It is good to hear you laugh, Esterel!" Lady Winstay said, "but what amuses you so much?"

"Your folly," she answered, pushing back her hair from her face, "and mine," she added, laughing again; this time a forced, joyless laugh.

It was lovely autumn weather. Just the weather for Southsand, which, to look gay and cheery, needed the sparkling blue of sunny water and the golden glitter of sunny sand. Lady Winstay was a capital hostess, and the days and weeks flew by; but the visit could not be prolonged for ever. Lady Winstay began to fear that it would come to an end, and that nothing definite would have happened; that Marian would return and all be as she wished it not to be. Yet, surely, she thought, that—as she knew Herbert was not made of iron—in one of those long morning rides or boating excur-

sions, when his place was always by Esterel's side; on one of those lazy afternoons, when they strolled on the sand; or on one of these evenings when he walked with her in the Pleasance, or lounged by her on the sea wall—only coming in to hang over the piano, while she sang and played—adding to the charm of her exquisite face the thrilling charm of the exquisite voice and the delicate and yet impassioned manner—surely, Lady Winstay thought, at one of these times something must be said or done that would settle matters: for she had no doubt that they loved each other.

Yet day followed day, and week followed week, and Lady Winstay saw no change. Mr. Hilhouse assumed the seat by Esterel as his right, assumed the right to call her by her Christian name, the right to give her his arm if he thought she were tired, the right to serve her, to take care of her; but no one disputed his right, and nothing showed that it was his save by assumption.

Esterel and her step-father had been a month at the Castle, and Mr. Downside felt obliged to speak of returning home. The weather grew stormy and unsettled, the sky had to be watched, and it was not often that the sea could be trusted.

Would nothing happen?



CHAPTER XXIX.

ON THE SEA-SHORE.

ONE stormy day, when it was too rough for the ladies to venture out, Lord Winstay went to Deerhurst on business, Mr. Downside accompanying him; not expecting to return till late. The weather improved towards evening, and Lady Winstay proposed a walk upon the shore: she needed a particular kind of sea-weed for the completion of some fancy-work she had on hand, and that morning's rough sea and high tide would have strewn the sands with it.

Just as they had left the Castle, Lady Winstay was recalled; some one wanted to speak to her on particular business.

"It is a pity for you two to wait," she said; "Esterel is looking quite dull with being in-doors all day; besides, I want my sea-weed, and don't know how long I shall be kept: though what 'business' any one can want to speak to me about I can't imagine. You two go on, like good children; I will follow you as soon as I can. Don't go the Bramblebridge way; there is more of the sea-weed, I mean, on the other side of the bay."

They went as directed, and where they had been directed to go. But they passed pool after pool, which the tide had left lined with the very weed Lady Winstay wanted, and paid no heed to her want.

The evening was dreary; perhaps its dreariness oppressed them, for they walked on and on in unusual silence.

The weed-strewn shore looked waste and desolate; the turbid, dinge-hued sea, with no sail visible upon it, was a tumultuous, melancholy void, over which the lowering sky frowned pitiless.

Mr. Hilhouse, who had made Esterel take his arm, felt that she shivered.

"Are you cold?" he asked, bending over her.

"No—oh, no; but to-night everything looks fateful and sad. Do not you feel it? Shall we not go home again?"

They paused: he looked round, and out to sea.

"I had not felt it," he answered; "I was thinking too deeply of other things. It certainly is not a cheerful evening, but I do not dislike these wild, weird-looking scenes. If you are not cold, nor tired, I should like to keep you out with me a little longer." He let his voice take a tone of peculiar tenderness.

"I am not cold, nor tired," she answered aloud; while her heart answered, "I would stay with you anywhere for ever."

As if he had heard the inward answer (perhaps it toned the outward), he pressed her hand closer, and then they walked on and on again, again in silence.

"How thoughtless of me!" he exclaimed by-and-by. Looking back, he knew, by the Castle being out of sight, that they must have walked a very considerable distance. "Thoughtless of me, indeed—just for the pleasure of having you by me—to bring you so far! You are tired, I am sure."

"Rather," she confessed.

"You must rest before we return. I brought this plaid for your use, not for mine. Let me spread it somewhere."

He looked about to find a seat for her. As she leant upon his arm her cheek was close to his shoulder. She was tired, profoundly tired, mind and body. An irresistible impulse made her touch his shoulder with her cheek, longing to rest it there. She did it so softly, so lightly, she thought he could not know, but he turned upon her suddenly; she was pushing a stray tress off her face with her hand. The touch, which he would have liked to dare believe voluntary, might have been mere accident.

"This will do, I think," he said. Folding the plaid, he laid it upon a sunken rock, and made her sit there, throwing himself upon the sand and shingle at her feet. Close in front of them the waves tumbled in with a dull lifeless noise; to the right and to the left stretched away the desolate shore upon which the evening descended heavily, upon which nothing visible stirred.

No human habitation, not even the meanest hut or hovel, was in sight. No sign of human life and industry, not even a boat drawn up upon the beach, nor a net spread there to dry.

Inexpressibly dreary and desolate were both the facts and the atmosphere of the scene.

"That is strange! Where can they have sprung from?" Mr. Hilhouse said, presently. Looking in the direction in which he pointed, Esterel saw a bent old man, resting himself against a bit of rock, leaning forward upon a staff, and a dog

lying at his feet. The man was at no great distance, and had his face turned towards them.

"We passed that rock; the man and his dog must have been inside it, or in hiding somewhere, if they were on the shore then!" Mr. Hilhouse added. But he turned away, and both he and Esterel soon forgot the old man's existence; listening, perhaps, to the dull, heavy thud of the waves upon the shore, and the laughing screech of distant sea-gulls, brought to them fitfully on the fitful wind.

"I wonder," Mr. Hilhouse began, presently, leaning on his elbow, and looking up at Esterel, "I wonder is any man worthy of any woman's love. I hardly think it. Do you?"

"Yes—oh, yes," she answered, dreamily. "You know your own faults; but ours, of course, you do not know. Some women are wicked: wicked beyond what you could believe."

"I wonder," he continued with a smile, plainly expressing incredulity of their existence, "of what faults you, Esterel, whom I have found so true and kind a friend, could accuse yourself?"

"Do not ask, do not ask," she answered, passionately, though very softly, "Oh! may you never, never know!"

"Shall I guess?" he asked, smiling. "I fear to do so; I fear that hope may lead me astray." He vainly fancied that she accused herself of loving him too well; perhaps even of having loved him too long—of having loved him when he had loved Marian. (*Had loved!*) Passion came into his voice as he added, "Your friendship—would I might dare say your love—your friendship is the one thing that now lends sweetness to my life; a sweetness inexpressibly dear and precious. If I must give it up—I cannot give it up! And yet I must, or I must claim more, far more; more than I dare claim: more than, perhaps, you will think me free to claim—what I am quite unworthy to claim, were I free as air! Profoundly unworthy, wavering and inconstant as my heart has been!"

Was he not quite sure of his ground? Was he wishing

to save his pride at the expense of hers? or why did he not say more at once?

"Do not talk of any unworthiness but mine!" she said. "If only you knew me;—if only you knew me, you would scorn me, despise me, perhaps hate me."

"That nothing in this world could make me do!" he cried.

Esterel burst into unrestrained, yet not ungentle weeping. Strange as it may seem, it was in this moment of her triumph—for his tone and look proclaimed that he loved her—that confession trembled on her lips. It seemed to her that her heart, which had been so hard, dissolved its hardness suddenly as she listened to his words. Tenderly, pitifully, she thought of Marian, and the burning bitterness of passion was being quenched by these tears.

He ventured to encircle her with his arm, to draw her head upon his shoulder. She let it rest there while she wept: wept with foreknowledge of her loss in gain; as she felt that her heart could not hold at once the happy knowledge of his love, and the heavy knowledge of her secret guilt.

Had he been silent a few moments more he would have learnt all. And then? Why, now he loved Esterel, not Marian. But he did not keep silent those few moments more.

"Esterel!" he whispered, pleadingly. "Shall I save you from confession? Dare I guess of what sin it is that you accuse yourself?"

"No, no, no," she cried, her whole being undergoing change. "You do not dare! you must not dare!" She lifted up her head and looked him in the face defiantly. She drew away from him, in fear: in pride, he thought. "Let us go home," she said; "it is late and cold, it will soon be getting dark. Let us go home." She rose as she finished speaking.

All his pride flew to arms at her changed manner.

"If she loves me it is against her will, and she is too proud to marry me," he thought.

He got up at her bidding without a word. Wounded to the quick in his love and in his pride, disappointed grievously, humbled and abashed in his own eyes, and dreading the ridicule of others, he walked beside her, as they turned towards the Castle, with a sullen brow and angry eye.

Esterel's heart died within her ; all warmth and light died from her face. " Does he guess ? " she thought.

He noted all the change, and half pitied her, while he cursed her pride, and felt his love for her burn wildly.

Heedless of anything but each other and themselves, they pursued the way, which led them past the rock against which the old man still leant, the dog still lying at his feet.

Whether Esterel touched the dog in passing, whether it was the unprovoked savageness of its nature, or whether, as Esterel believed, the animal was set on her by its master, Mr. Hilhouse could not afterwards say, but just as they had passed the dog flew up at Esterel, catching her by the sleeve, and holding on by it. They were both certain afterwards that the old man then chuckled joyfully, and that he made no motion towards beating off his dog. " He's caught thee, thou white witch ! " were words that Esterel heard distinctly.

In a moment Mr. Hilhouse had seized the old man's staff, regardless of the fact that in doing so he threw its owner to the ground. The dog's hold was fast ; though Mr. Hilhouse dealt him vigorous blows, trying, meanwhile, with the other hand, to loosen his teeth from what they held. Afraid to seize the animal by the throat and drag him off, lest doing so he should tear Esterel's tender flesh, he presently threw away the staff, and with both hands tried to force open the firmly-set jaws.

" Leave him alone, oh, leave him alone ; make the old man call him off. It is only my sleeve ; I am not hurt : you will be bitten : leave him alone," Esterel entreated, looking into his blanched determined face. Then she uttered a sharp cry ; for the dog, loosening his hold of her sleeve at last, fastened on the back of the hand that was literally in his mouth.

The old man, who had slowly picked himself up, now picked up his staff too, and called the animal: then the two limped off together. Apparently the old man was crazy, for as he retreated he turned to shout out wild incoherent curses, chiefly levelled at the "cursed white witch."

To this Mr. Hilhouse paid little heed: he was occupied in assuring himself that Esterel's arm, the beautiful, soft white arm which the torn sleeve had bared to the shoulder, was uninjured. It had escaped unscathed: there was no slightest scratch. He tore off the remnants of the tattered sleeve, for it was soiled and wet from the dog's mouth, and then wrapped the plaid round her. All this he did in silence; but it was silence far more eloquent than words: his face was pale, his eyes looked large and bright, and he trembled. She knew this was not from fear, but from horror at her danger. Esterel's eyes were fixed upon his hand, though he tried to hide it from her.

"Let me look at your wound: I *will* look at it," she said, resolutely.

When he had finished his cares for her, and was going to draw her hand through his arm and hurry her home, she would not move till he obeyed her. The failing light was her excuse for bending low over the hand which he, at last, held out reluctantly. Suddenly she seized it firmly in both hers. He felt her soft, warm lips upon the wound; her teeth pressed hard against it.

Who would have thought those slight wrists could have had such power? Struggle as he did, with many an exclamation of horrified entreaty, when he found that she was sucking the wound, he could not free his hand, unless he had used actual violence, till she chose that he should do so.

"Good heavens! what have you done?" he cried. "And I thought that you were too proud to love me!"

They gazed each into the other's wild face; then he took Esterel into his arms, calling her the tenderest of tender names.

She gave herself up to his embrace, whispering, "That is nothing ! I would give my life for yours."

He held her so close, pressed her to him with such ardent love and gratitude, that surely the memory of Marian could not then slip in between them.



CHAPTER XXX.

DANGER FROM WITHOUT.

THAT they reached the Castle, Mr. Hilhouse and Esterel knew, because they by-and-by found themselves standing under the blaze of the hall-lamp. How they reached it, over what enchanted ground, was another matter.

Lady Winstay had been uneasily on the watch for their return ; something which had made her uneasy had happened in their absence. She appeared from the drawing-room almost as soon as they entered the house, and her exclamation of horror when she first saw Esterel, attracted Lord Winstay and Mr. Downside, who had a short time before returned from Deerhurst.

Esterel's white face was stained with blood—not her own blood, but that from her lover's hand. They were both unconscious of this till now, when Lady Winstay's exclamation drew the attention of Mr. Hilhouse to the fact.

"She is not hurt ; I assure you she is not," Mr. Hilhouse said, as he pushed his way to the drawing-room they had left, leading Esterel to a sofa. "She is faint and exhausted, but, thank God, not hurt."

The way he bent over Esterel, and—snatching Lady Winstay's embroidered handkerchief, pouring over it some perfume from a bottle that stood near—wiped those stains from her face, whispering to her as he did so, explained something to them all ; but not all they wanted explained.

"Patience, and I will tell you. One thing more first :

examine Esterel's arm, Rosa. There is no scratch, is there ?" He held a light while his cousin obeyed his orders ; not satisfied with Lady Winstay's verdict, he again examined the arm himself. Then, in his utter bewilderment of excitement, wonder, gratitude, and happiness, he kissed that arm before them all.

"Pretty well !" commented Lady Winstay, as she turned away.

Mr. Hilhouse threw himself into a chair near Esterel, and explained what had taken place, so far as to state that a dog belonging to an old man who was loitering about the shore, had suddenly attacked Esterel, and that he had had difficulty in beating it off.

"But the blood," Mr. Downside said. "If her arm is not hurt, she must be hurt elsewhere. There was blood on her face."

"The blood must have been mine," Mr. Hilhouse answered, composedly.

"*You* are hurt ? Your hand is bitten ! Pray, Lord Winstay, send for a surgeon at once !" her ladyship exclaimed, noticing now that he kept a handkerchief wrapped round one of his hands. She had listened to his story with great attention, interrupting him only once, and then to ask some question about the old man's appearance ; which question Mr. Hilhouse—considering it to be dictated by her usual frivolous interest in small things—had answered with brief impatience.

"Yes, a surgeon must be sent for," he said now. "I was going to make that request myself," he added.

He was anxious, wildly anxious, to know if Esterel had run any risk by doing what she had done.

Esterel raised her head and looked at him.

"There can be no danger for me," he whispered, answering the look ; "it is for you that I am afraid."

"The wound will have to be cauterized !" Lord Winstay remarked, when he had given an order for the summoning of the nearest surgeon.

"I hardly think so," said Lady Winstay, smiling up, coldly and wickedly, into her cousin's eyes. She had been kneeling by him: examining his hand, from which she had taken the handkerchief: her quick ears having caught his words to Esterel, her quick wits divined what had happened. "The wound was incurred in Esterel's service, Esterel has undertaken the cure; a soothing poultice will now be all-sufficient, I fancy," she added.

Mr. Hilhouse winced under her look and her tone; so keenly, coldly satirical were they both.

"Incomprehensible being!" she whispered as she turned to Esterel. "I could not for any man have done what you have done: but perhaps you have not my horror of going mad!"

Poor Esterel! yet not poor; even the thought of madness—of which for long years she had entertained a maniacal horror—could have little terror for her now, if the risk of it were run for him. She said nothing with her lips; but her eyes, fixed on her lover's face, said this.

"But, perhaps," Mr. Hilhouse observed in answer to his cousin, "you have never known such a glorious impulse of self-sacrificing devotion as that on which she acted."

Mr. Downside and Lord Winstay presently left the room, withdrawing to the library for a quiet game of chess; to which Lord Winstay was the challenger, and of which Mr. Downside, agitated as he was, was of course the loser. He was agitated not only by the thought of the risk his darling had run, but by other thoughts, also, the sources of which were as yet hidden in his own heart.

Lady Winstay was certainly of a forgiving disposition. When the door closed upon them, she threw her arms round her cousin's neck and kissed him heartily, crying,—

"Herbert! I *am* so glad!" Then she looked at Esterel; but something in Esterel's face repressed any further expression of gladness. "I hope that man will come soon," she said, "the surgeon, I mean; for I am sure you need rest, and ought to be got to bed, my dear girl."

Lord Winstay, talking to Mr. Downside, had said a good deal about the conduct of the old man whose dog had attacked Esterel—threatening to have him hunted out, brought to punishment, and the dog shot.

To all that had passed, Esterel had listened in silence; she said now, quite abruptly,—

“Rosa, will you tell Lord Winstay that it is my particular wish nothing should be done to punish that old man? I would rather no inquiry were made about him.”

Lady Winstay paused before she replied—darting a sharp glance upon Esterel and changing colour: then she answered, lightly,—

“I see; I understand. You are grateful? The happy catastrophe might have been longer delayed but for — oh, I see. Are you equally grateful, Herbert?”

“For this wound on my hand I can never be too grateful; as long as I live I shall love the mark.” He smiled to himself as he recalled the sensation he had experienced at the touch of those soft warm lips. But his face clouded, as he added, “I wish that man would come! Do *you* think she has incurred any risk, Rosa? And, by-the-by, can the surgeon you have sent for be trusted not to gossip about this affair?”

“I can’t say, indeed,” Rosa answered.

Then, as the lover knelt by his mistress, addressing to her the most passionate expressions of gratitude and admiration, the room grew too hot for Lady Winstay. She left it for the hall: there she walked to and fro, keeping the door open to the outer air, till the surgeon arrived.

He, a grave man, heard all the story gravely; prescribed rest and quiet, some simple medical treatment, and dismissed the lovers’ fears one for the other.

When he was gone they parted for the night; Esterel going to her room.

It was easy to prescribe rest and quiet; but for Esterel that night neither were possible. By-and-by she sent for her step-father; she wanted to see him alone.

Mr. Downside tried to excuse himself: for many reasons he needed a night of reflection before he could feel prepared to meet his daughter in her new character; he had more matters than she knew of, or than she dreamt of in her wildest dreams on which to reflect. But Esterel's second message was more urgent than her first: she could not try to sleep till she had seen him, it said; so he had no alternative: shaken and unhinged, he entered her presence.

Esterel was in her white dressing-gown; her hair, which her maid had been combing out, was hanging loose about her.

"Would to God she were as guileless and innocent as she looks, my beautiful one!" he thought, as she rose and came towards him.

"What is it, Esterel? Is anything amiss?" he asked.

"Why should anything be amiss? Would it not be natural, father" — in her joy (for joy would thrill through all fear), she called him as she knew he delighted to hear her call him—"that I should send for you to rejoice with me, and to give me your blessing? He loves me, father, he loves me! What can be amiss? Must not all be well?"

He stood before her; wavering to and fro in such extreme agitation as she could not understand: it was some moments before he spoke.

"And you could not give him up? It would kill you if he gave you up? And you could not give him up?" he asked, at last.

"It would be no use now; he loves me—not Marian, but me. It would be only cruel now, cruel to him, for he loves me—not Marian, but me."

"I was not thinking of Marian, of quite other matters. Is he proud, this lover of yours, my child? Could he bear a stain of dishonour on what he loved — of impersonal dishonour, involuntary dishonour?"

"He is proud," said Esterel, proudly. Then she added, wildly, "You mean that I must confess all my dishonour and let him give me up!"

“Not such dishonour as you mean. Again I say, I am thinking of quite other matters—matters of which you know nothing—of things that happened before you were born. You sent for me to ask my blessing, child! And how can I bless you?” He clasped her in his arms, and said, “If you might but be as happy as I wish you; if all pain, all punishment, might fall on me, and you be happy! God pity us! God pity me and you, and you and me, and him, and forgive us all our sins!”

She turned up her face and kissed him, stroking his cheek soothingly; it was seldom that she caressed him, either by word or deed.

“Love and happiness might make me good,” she said, “only—to be good I must give them up!” She sighed and wound herself out of his arms, adding,—

“I did not send for you to ask your blessing—I know you cannot bless me. It was for something else: to ask you to make sure that no search is made for that old man. When he called out curses after me”—she shuddered, and added to herself, “those curses are all the blessing I can look for.—When he cursed me, it flashed upon me that he was the old man who went away with Marian. She had sent him home; perhaps with a letter to her mother, perhaps with a letter to me, perhaps only to try and learn something about us all. Don’t you think it is so?”

“It may be so. Oh, child, that all this were over! Esterel, Esterel, could you not give him up? Search your heart. Try. Could you not give him up?”

She smiled, answering,—

“I have no heart to search. I had a hard heart, hard as a stone, but it is gone. I have no heart, he has it all— all my heart, all my life. I *can* only give up life and him together!”

“Well!” he said, after a long pause. “Well, be at rest; no one shall interfere with that old man. Be at rest; try to be happy.”

He bade her the tenderest good-night, and went. He did not sleep that night for the many perplexities enwinding him; for the many thoughts of things in the past which affected Esterel's present and Esterel's future. Should he try Esterel's lover? Should he trust to his honour, his disinterestedness, and his love? What if they did not stand the test?—a stern test. That the man was not firm nor faithful, his present relation to Esterel proved.

Morning dawned on poor Mr. Downside's weak resolve to hold his peace; to do nothing to peril Esterel's chance, her frail and feeble chance of happiness. But oh! how he longed to feel his feet once more in open ways! longed to emerge from under this shadow of evil to come, which seemed ever blackening and deepening!



CHAPTER XXXI.

DANGER FROM WITHIN.

"WHAT happened while we were out last night?" Mr. Hilhouse asked abruptly the first time he found himself alone with Lady Winstay. "No prevarication, if you please, Rosa; I mean to know, so you may as well speak at once."

"It was only because I wished to spare you and Esterel worry that I said nothing about it; at least, that was my chief reason."

"Your intentions, I know, are always of the best; but, even for my own good, I would rather not be kept in the dark."

"You remember some one wanted to see me, just as I was going out? Well, it was an old man; no doubt the very man whose dog attacked Esterel; for while he spoke to me in this room, a savage-looking animal, which he said was his, was prowling on the sea-wall walk outside; and when he left the

Castle he followed the direction you had taken, the dog close at his heels."

"Well?"

"I don't know that you will think it altogether well; yet it all amounts to nothing. The man was very abusive: I had trouble in getting rid of him. He said he was Mrs. Fay's uncle, the old man who went away with Marian."

"Not a word of this to Esterel," Mr. Hilhouse said quickly.

"Of course not. I am not quite a fool," was the ready answer.

"What more? Could you make out the man's object in coming? And what did you say that made him abusive?"

"I think he is half-crazy, and he talks a queer jargon besides. Marian had sent him to bring her news of home, I fancy. Perhaps it was the news I gave him that made him angry."

"Did you get any tidings of that poor child?" Mr. Hilhouse asked.

Lady Winstay did not like her cousin's paleness, his softened manner, nor the way the newspaper trembled in his hand.

"I do believe he loves them both!" she commented to herself. Then she answered, "I gathered from what the old man said—but he was very incoherent, I may be wrong—but I fancied from something he said, that Marian is going to be married."

Mr. Hilhouse bent his head so that she could not see his face, to judge of the effect she had produced. There was a silence; then he asked,—

"But what brought the old man to *you*?"

"If Marian sent him to gather news for her, would she not naturally have sent him to me?"

"But what did he ask?"

"His first question was, whether you were going to be married."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you were. It was no lie. I knew it as well yesterday morning as I know it this morning. I did not tell him to whom."

Another pause; then Mr. Hilhouse said,—

"You will be careful that Esterel learns nothing of this. It would pain and agitate her needlessly."

Mr. Hilhouse left the room; what he was thinking and feeling Lady Winstay could not quite make out.

"I do believe he loves them both," she said again.

As a matter of form Mr. Hilhouse sought an interview with Mr. Downside that day. Mr. Downside treated the application as only a matter of form; treated it, as Mr. Hilhouse thought, cavalierly, answering briefly,—

"There is no need for any explanation between us; my step-daughter is her own mistress; you have only to please her and I shall be pleased."

This answer galled the lover's pride. "The old gentleman is vexed: he thinks, no doubt, that an heiress should have done better," he commented inwardly. "However, I will make it clear to the whole world, that it is Esterel herself I want, and not her gold!"

It was curious, but they both felt it; though neither acknowledged it, even to their own heart, both Esterel and Mr. Hilhouse felt that now they had less pleasure, less freedom, in each other's society. They both thought much of Marian, and they each strove to hide the fact that they ever thought of her, lest that fact should set the other thinking of her too. This put a restraint upon their intercourse, a restraint that was felt the more because of the passionate unreserve with which they loved.

After their engagement, however, they were but a few days together. Mr. Downside took Esterel home to Bramblebridge, and Mr. Hilhouse immediately went up to London. The Winstays were also going to London: it was arranged that Esterel and her father should follow them by-and-by, and

that the wedding should be from their house. Esterel left everything to her friends ; there seemed to be nothing to wait for, and a general impression prevailed that the wedding should be soon.

Lady Winstay found the bride's conduct altogether unaccountable, and her indifference about all details most unnatural. She kept her own counsel, however ; though in her heart she began to pity Herbert, thinking he would have so strange a wife.

It was wise of Mr. Downside to take Esterel home : she felt that it was wise. She had already said to herself many times,—“ I shall lose him for ever if we do not part now ! My heart will burst with trying to hold all my love, and to keep the secret from him. And it would be cruel to him to tell him now—only cruel ; for indeed he loves me ! ”

She was right in that ; he loved her passionately. Had Marian, poor Marian, pretty Marian, now appeared to claim him, she would have been as welcome as—well ! as a first wife's ghost appearing at a man's second marriage-feast : and, however men may deceive themselves, one can hardly imagine that such an apparition would be welcomed, or looked upon as that of an approving guest.



CHAPTER XXXII.

THE DANGER DEEPENS.

ONE morning soon after their return to Bramblebridge, as they sat together at the breakfast table, Esterel, quite without relation to anything that had passed before, laying tremulous white fingers on Mr. Downside's arm, said, after a furtive look round the room, “ Mrs. Fay ; ” only that.

“ Ah ! ” Mr. Downside breathed out. There was a long

pause, during which Esterel looked aside, before he answered her unspoken question. "I think you must tell her yourself," he answered, at last. "She would soon learn it. If you tell her yourself, you will perhaps disarm her natural resentment."

"Tell her myself!" echoed Esterel.

"I am sorry, you know, to impose this or any pain upon you. But my firm opinion is that you had better tell her yourself; and soon."

"This morning, then, and it will be over."

Half an hour afterwards Esterel was on her way to the cottage. The autumn wind was keen and blustering: usually she would have shrunk from it, as a sensitive plant shrinks from the touch; but now she paid it no heed: her whole being was drawing to a centre—that centre the matter in hand. She feared Mrs. Fay, and the result of this disclosure, inexpressibly.

Mrs. Fay saw her coming, and met her on the threshold with the startling words,—

"There's news of Marian since you went away, Miss Esterel. Where is Mr. Hilhouse? can you tell me, ma'am? I want to let him know. Uncle has some story that he is going to be married; but that can't be true, you know."

"What is the news of Marian?" asked Esterel, faintly. Mrs. Fay led the way in: she set a chair for her visitor, and removed her cloak—on which some drops of rain had fallen—as she answered,—

"It's good news; or, at least, no ways bad. It's uncle there that brought it. He brought it some days since; after that we lost him, and he's just back again this morning."

Esterel's heart stood still as she turned and saw sitting by the kitchen hearth—Marian's parlour was never used now Marian was away—the old man whom she had seen upon the shore at Southsand: the dog that had attacked her there was lying at his feet. The dog growled out a recognition: in his own way, muttering to himself, the master did the same.

Mrs. Fay silenced both ; shaking Mark by the shoulder, she said,—

“Go out a bit, uncle, while the lady’s here. This is the lady Marian was so fond of: the lady that was so kind to Marian, uncle.”

“Kind to Marian, did you say? Marian fond of her?” the old man asked, with a cunning, incredulous air. “Then I ask yer pardon, my lady,” he said, as he rose and hobbled away. “I ask yer pardon. It can’t be you, then, as wronged Marian; it can’t be you.” He repeated this, chuckling to himself.

“I think he takes you for my Lady Winstay,” apologized Mrs. Fay. “He’s gone quite foolish-like, is poor old uncle, and it don’t do to pay much heed to what he says. He says himself that it’s been nothing but tramping here and whirling there till he’s main dazed. He talks quite childish, and we can’t make out one half he means: but he brought us the letter from Marian, safe enough.”

“A letter! What does it say? It tells you where she is? and when she is coming home?”

“No, more’s the pity. She’s somewhere in London, that’s all we know; and she says she can’t come home yet.”

“In London!” Through Esterel’s brain flashed a thousand thoughts—of all meetings between Marian and Mr. Hilhouse, and of the explanation that must then inevitably follow.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Fay went on,—

“Yes, Miss Esterel, she’s in London; a terrible way off, isn’t it? and a dangerous place for a young girl. But Marian says she has found good friends, and is quite safe. She sent uncle home because he was pining, she thought, for the smell of the sea and the sight of the ships. I’d show you Marian’s letter, Miss Esterel, only Luke’s out, and he keeps it in his pocket. It’s a dressmaking place she’s got; she was always clever at her needle, you know. You remember, Miss Esterel, how beautiful she made those things for you, ma’am? putting

in six stitches where one would have done, just for the love of you. Oh, she did love you." For a moment, Mrs. Fay's eyes rested on Esterel with something wistful and searching in their look; then she went on, "I've written to Marian; she gave us the name of a post-office to write to. She said she couldn't do longer without news; said she was hungry and thirsty for news."

"She says nothing of why she went away?"

"Not one word."

"Nor sends me any message?"

"No, ma'am, none."

"Nor sends Mr. Hilhouse any message?"

"Not a word. But I must tell him the news, Miss Esterel. Do you know where he is, ma'am? It is many weeks since he has been near us. I want him to know the news; though there is no word of coming home, or of why she went away, my heart has been light, and so has Luke's, since the letter came. Every word tells us that she is our good girl still; that whoever has wronged her she has done no wrong. Do you know where Mr. Hilhouse is, ma'am."

"In London."

"He in London, too! Now isn't that strange? But London is so big a place, they mayn't meet, perhaps. Where in London, Miss Esterel?"

"I think you will not need to write to him. I came here to-day to tell you something." Esterel drew a deep, shuddering sigh.

"Not that he is going to be married?" said Mrs. Fay, turning upon her with sharpened voice and face. "Don't tell me that!—so as he seemed to love our Marian!"

"It is true. He is going to be married—he is going to marry me."

Mrs. Fay did not move, nor speak: this news gave her, as she said afterwards, "a stun."

If she had turned upon Esterel and abused her, Esterel would have felt that as a relief; what she dreaded was to

hear expressions of scorn and anger heaped upon Mr. Hillhouse.

"I came here to tell you myself, Mrs. Fay," she continued, when she had waited some time and Mrs. Fay did not speak, "because I did not wish you to hear it first from any one else. I thought it would be better that you should hear it from me."

"Aren't you afraid?" were Mrs. Fay's first words. They startled Esterel. "Aren't you afraid? So as he seemed to love Marian! And now he seems to love you! And in another six months won't it be some one else? Aren't you afraid, Miss Esterel?"

"Six months is a long time. I don't look forward—not six months any more than six years: I may be dead before six months."

"So may any of us. Dead and brought to judgment. Then may God have mercy on the guilty! It's a queer world, a queer world. There's wrong done to Marian, poor lamb, somehow. That you should marry her lover, can't be right. It makes things look as if you had done the wrong! I can't wish you joy, Miss Esterel. For your mother's sake I won't wish you harm; but I can't wish you joy, Miss Esterel!"

After a long fixed look at Esterel, Mrs. Fay turned her back upon her, and left the room without another word.

Esterel waited; but, finding that Mrs. Fay did not return, humbly and with a heavy, heavy heart, she presently went away from the cottage.

Outside the garden-paling stood the old man, whom she began to think of as her evil genius. Esterel shuddered and shrank aside not to pass him close; yet she could not avoid looking at him, and she thought she read mischief and unspoken malice in his eyes.

As a timid child gropes its way through the dark; its face backward-turned, dreading pursuit, its arms outstretched to ward off coming danger; so Esterel groped her way through the days and weeks that followed. A sudden opening of the

door would make her start and tremble ; a more troubled look than usual on her father's face, which was always troubled now, would fill her with a sick suspense of secret dread.

She lived to write to Mr. Hilhouse daily, and to read his daily letters. His daily letters which day by day expressed more ardent love ; for his love grew by what it fed upon—the strength and warmth of hers.

In her letters Esterel set her being free. Her lover often trembled, sometimes he even wept, over them. The virgin wealth and the wild beauty of her nature ; the utter abandonment of devotion with which she loved him ; her agony of rapture in his love, expressed without stint or measure, and with a child's innocent simplicity and directness : these things penetrated to his heart's core. It seemed to him that she poured out the purest poetry of passion, and that in the most fervid heat of love her soul showed white and stainless as ununsunned snow.

He would have said that it was the fire of madness, or of genius, or something of them both, which leapt forth from her and ran in tongues of flame along her kindling lines, had he not known it was the fire of love.

“ I would have you love me less,” he wrote once, “ while I will love you, if it may be, more and more. I tremble to be the object of such love as yours. It seems to me you will consume yourself in the fervour of such love. I dare not think of this—of such a costly sacrifice burnt on so mean an altar. What I desire is, not to have you thus spend yourself in loving me, but that I may eke out your weakness with my strength—your life with mine.”

She wrote in answer,—

“ I cannot love you less, nor more. I just love you with all I am. I live and can live only in this love. I would burn out my life in incense, while life is love. Because I am worthless and unworthy I know that you cannot love me long ; so I would burn myself out swiftly in loving, that my life may not outlast your love.”

The tone of Esterel's letters grew, her lover thought, more and more overwrought; he became desperately anxious to hasten on the time when he should have her in his keeping. The atmosphere of the Hall—with its memory-haunted rooms, in which she held those vigils she had confessed to him—was telling upon her physical, and so upon her mental health he thought.

Owing to his importunities—which Lady Winstay seconded, by forwarding all the arrangements; she had been delighted to undertake the trouble of Esterel's outfit—the short time that was to have interposed between the engagement and the wedding was shortened.

A month earlier than had at first been planned, Mr. Downside and Esterel started for Lord Winstay's London house.

Esterel's last night at the Hall had been passed before her mother's picture; in an agony of supplication that she might lose all, only not her lover's love; suffer all, only not his scorn; taste all bitterness, only not the bitterness of his just anger.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

DRAWING ON!

From Bramblebridge to London was a long and tedious journey then, even when performed in the most rapid and the most luxurious manner. Did Esterel think of what it must have been for poor little Marian, with her light purse, and her heavy heart?—a weary journey, doubtless. But Esterel hardly pitied Marian; for Marian was innocent, and the guilty who are not hardened beyond a sense of guilt, can hardly pity the innocent.

“The end is coming on! the end is coming on!”

Those words so rang in Esterel's head; all the noises of

the journey so set themselves to those words, that at last in desperation she spoke them aloud.

She and Mr. Downside were alone in their own carriage, travelling towards the nearest railway-station.

"The happy end, as I trust," Mr. Downside answered, soothingly.

"Have there been such things as happy endings to stories about Bramblebridge Hall? Not to any that I have heard."

"We are leaving the Hall behind us, Esterel; henceforth the story of your life will be no story of the Hall, I trust. I think you will have a husband with no will but yours; ready to take you where you wish to go, to live where you may wish to live."

"That is not what I want," answered Esterel, softly. "I have willed wickedness; I wish never again to have a will: I wish to live by his."

"Let me give you a caution now, my child, I may have no other opportunity. Alone with me, say what you will; but, in the presence of others, be guarded. Sometimes you suffer your looks and words to be strange and uncontrolled. This must not be; you must not let this habit grow upon you: keep watch over yourself."

"That would be such a weary thing to do!" she murmured.

She drew closer to him: putting her cheek against his shoulder, and looking up into his face, she asked,—

"Do *you* think I shall go mad some day? *Was* my mother mad before she died? People said so, Lady Winstay told me."

Before Mr. Downside could frame any answer, she questioned farther,—

"When I am mad, what shall you do with me?"

"While I live, I would give you no other keeper, nor guardian."

"But if I am married first?"

"Then you would have two fond guardians. But do not

talk in this wild way ; it shocks and grieves me. Why should you talk of going mad ? ”

“ Long ago I heard what I have never forgotten ; heard some one say that I should go mad if —— ”

“ A childish dream ! only a childish dream ; think no more of it,” Mr. Downside interrupted. “ Do not give way to such fancies : study to be quiet, and to keep your mind as calm and as much under control as possible.”

Just at this time a little scene was being enacted between Lady Winstay and Mr. Hilhouse in the breakfast room of Lord Winstay’s splendid town house. Lord Winstay was present ; but he was occupied with the morning paper.

“ I am giving you up for ever, Herbert ! ” Lady Winstay said, pathetically. “ Esterel will be far more jealous as a wife than Algernon is as a husband, so I feel I am giving you up for ever ; therefore, you might oblige me, by complying with my request ; by coming here altogether for these few last days — abandoning those dear bachelor quarters at once.”

Lady Winstay had her reasons which she did not state, as well as those she did, for urging this : she felt as if things would be “ safer to end well ” if she had both bridegroom and bride under her own surveillance.

“ I am no way loath,” answered Mr. Hilhouse ; “ but I thought the other plan, being more conventionally proper, more likely to have met your views. You are amusing, Rosa ! I must say ; you talk magnanimously of giving me up for ever, as if I were at present in some sort your private property ; and you speak of marriage as if it were a kind of end to all things.”

“ Being my only relative, you are in some sort my property. My husband is, of course, a mere connection ! ” she said, with a brilliant smile towards that connection. “ But I have something very special to say to you, to ask you, this morning.” She knelt down before him on an ottoman, and took his hand.

“ Shall I retire ? ” asked Lord Winstay, looking towards

them, over his newspaper ; with an expression in which mild displeasure and considerable amusement struggled for the mastery.

Lady Winstay sometimes tried even his patience ; and, in fact, though he had, in some ways, a high opinion of Mr. Hilhouse ; and though he enjoyed his companionship, he was not sorry that this “ giving up for ever ” was contemplated.

“ Oh, no ! there is no occasion in the world for you to retire,” Lady Winstay answered, carelessly. “ Lost in that dear debate, you will hear nothing, I am sure ! besides, if you did, it would not matter.”

She lowered her voice a little, and took a serious air, as she continued, to her cousin,—

“ I know your face so well, I have known it so long, that you cannot deceive me. I know that something has happened to vex you : have you had any misunderstanding with Esterel ? ”

That was not her fear ; or, probably, that would not have been her question.

“ Certainly not !—Pray do not take credit to yourself for skill in worming a secret out of me ; for I meant to tell you, at a suitable opportunity, what I tell you now. I saw Marian Fay yesterday. Did you know she was in London ? ”

“ No ; or I would not have had the marriage here. Did she see you ? Did you meet face to face ? Did you speak to her ? ”

“ No ; to all those questions. I was standing at a shop-door ; she passed, one of a full stream, carrying a large parcel. She has lost her freshness ; she looked worn and sad, poor child. The expression of her face set my heart aching.”

“ She is quite plain now, no doubt ; hers was mere childish prettiness, not warranted to wear.”

“ I do not agree with you at all. It was loveliness that will look lovely to the end.”

Lady Winstay was seriously alarmed.

“ Tell Esterel of this meeting, and she will insist upon

finding Marian out!" she said. "Esterel is so generous, so impulsive, so excitable, she will give you up; and then she will go mad, or die! If you wish to keep Esterel, I warn you to say nothing about Marian."

"Poor Marian!" murmured Mr. Hilhouse. "Her pale face haunts me; I should like to know that she is well and happy; I do not believe your story about her being married. I wish, if it were for her happiness, the story might be true. Mine was a brief infatuation—my beautiful and devoted princess has cured me quite. But I feel strangely ill at ease. You remember a queer-looking letter addressed to me, under cover to you, which you gave me yesterday? It was from Mrs. Fay."

"Well?" asked Lady Winstay, breathlessly.

"She would have written before, she said, if she could have learnt my address: she got yours from the servants at the Castle."

"What does she say?"

"I think the loss of her daughter has unsettled her mind. Her letter is a strange one; harping upon the notion that her daughter has been cruelly dealt with——"

"By me, of course," Lady Winstay whispered.

"Her suspicions point elsewhere. It seems to me that she is wild, mad, and ungrateful enough to suspect that Esterel may have had a hand in the matter!"

"Esterel!" Lady Winstay cried, and sprang up. "Esterel!" she repeated: then, during a few moments of silence, a train of evidence, seeming to her conclusive, flashed through her quick brain. Mrs. Fay must be right; Esterel must have played a part in this business. She had always thought that her own agency could hardly so soon, and so easily, have effected so much; she would have felt sure of this sooner, had she been a little less vain.

"Esterel mix in such a matter!" Lady Winstay said, at last, with deliberation and with an accent of supremely contemptuous incredulity. "Poor Mrs. Fay!" she continued.

"Her pitiful molehill has, indeed, grown to be a mountain in her imagination ! I wonder she did not fancy it was the Queen's doing—that the Queen had spirited Marian away because she wanted you for one of the princesses ! Poor Mrs. Fay ! I am sorry for her ! After you are married, when I have leisure, I will search out Marian, and persuade her to go home. What motive does Mrs. Fay assign to Esterel for playing a part in this affair ? "

"Can you not imagine ? " asked Mr. Hilhouse, flushing to the temples.

"That she herself then loved you, and wished to marry you, I suppose ! Good heavens, what a story ! "

"Long ago, you tried to make me believe that Esterel was not indifferent to me."

"As I tried to make Esterel believe that you were not indifferent to her. A case of Beatrice and Benedict."

"You played a dangerous game."

"Perhaps. But, 'All's well that ends well.' Mine was a labour of love, and won't be 'Love's Labour Lost,' or 'Much ado about nothing ;' but will end 'As you like it.' You can't be too careful in keeping the slightest whisper of all this from reaching Esterel ; such suspicion from such a quarter would wound her to the quick."

Mr. Hilhouse smiled.

"You need hardly school me to be careful for her," he said. "Remember to fulfil your promise about Marian ; Esterel you may safely leave to me. I shall so watch and guard her that——"

"Of course, of course ; I understand," interrupted her ladyship.

Mr. Hilhouse soon afterwards quitted the house. He was going some hundred miles, or so, to meet Esterel and her father at a junction.

Left to herself, Lady Winstay's face lost all its gaiety.

"How glad I shall be when it is well over ! " she breathed out. "I do not know when I have felt so oppressed, so

harassed. If it does end well, I shall never believe in presentiments again. It is too late now to do anything but push things on. But I feel quite afraid of her: I feel as if I were marrying Herbert to—I don't know what—something dangerous and uncomfortable. I daresay I felt as bad before my own wedding, and that ended well. I can see now that Herbert and I would have led a cat and dog life. As it is, he neither loves nor respects me, only has a sort of careless liking for me; if we had married, perhaps even that liking would not have lasted. Esterel had better treat me well! After all is over shall I let her know what I suspect? It would give me a fine hold over her; but, I do not know, she is so strange!”

Lady Winstay spent a great part of the day in wandering over the house; often going into the rooms prepared for Esterel: three pretty rooms—sitting-room, bed-room, and dressing-room—one within the other, only separated by curtained door-ways. The balconies outside the windows were filled with such flowering plants as could be had at that season, sent in by Mr. Hilhouse—richly-perfumed hothouse plants, many of them; plants which would hardly live there even the few days that Esterel would occupy those rooms.

“I wish the wedding were to be to-morrow,” her ladyship said, fretfully, to Lord Winstay; with whom at last she took refuge from her own uneasy thoughts. “It is so dreary here at this season. I wish it were all over. It is as bad as marrying a daughter. Heigho! if I had a daughter, I might be a better woman. My lord, I am dull and dismally out of spirits. Can't you amuse me?”

“If you could induce yourself to listen to this debate, you would, I know, be amused by it.”

“Thank you,” she said, with a saucy curtsy; “but for the world I wouldn't be considered political.”

Perhaps, Lord Winstay sometimes thought, what he was far too courtly ever to say, that there was little danger of her being considered anything but a fool.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ON THE BRINK.

THE personal intercourse of the few days which intervened between the day of Esterel's arrival and that fixed for the wedding, was felt by both the lovers to be unideal and disappointing. Lady Winstay very seldom allowed Mr. Hilhouse to be alone with Esterel for more than a few moments at a time. There would be plenty of opportunity for that afterwards, she said, and now business must be attended to. This "business," this pomp and circumstance, annoyed Mr. Hilhouse, and sickened and wearied Esterel; but Lady Winstay maintained that it was good for both of them to have their wings daily clipt after this fashion—a fashion which made long and high flights impossible.

Perhaps they studied each other's faces the more for this restraint put upon spoken interchange of thought. Esterel's look pained her lover: it expressed, he thought, such an overwrought state of mind and body; she looked so fearfully frail: it seemed to him at times as if he could see the consuming fire glowing beneath the transparent skin, and burning in the dark depths of her mournful eyes. Over his countenance Esterel felt or fancied that there was a shadow; a shadow of something in the past that stood between them. Marian never being long absent from Esterel's thoughts, it was natural that she should fear and believe that Marian was often present to his.

They were, in fact, each grieved to see the other look different, so much less happy than they had hoped: each ignorant of the cause each had for anxious watching of the other.

On Mr. Downside was heaped the knowledge of everybody's sins and sufferings, anxieties and fears; and he, poor man, besides all this had to bear a secret and a heavy load; unlightened by human help or sympathy.

Unwelcome wedding-guests were come unbidden to be

present at this wedding feast : such guests as will always enter in where truth and innocence are not.

How slowly the days dragged on ! how long and varied an agony of conflicting passions Esterel suffered in each ! And her nights ! No wonder she looked more unearthly with each morning, and said with each morning, " I cannot bear another night ; I must tell him all." Yet the evening of the last day came, and she had held out in silence.

On that evening Mr. Hilhouse, entering the room where he had been told he should find Esterel, and not finding her, sat down by the fireside in no contented mood. Though he had thought that it was only a succession of vexatious accidents which had kept her so much from him ; though he had suspected no design, he had often been inexpressibly annoyed at the impossibility of getting half-an-hour's quiet talk with his betrothed.

It was twilight now, the pale short wintry twilight, outdoors. In the room the lamps were not yet lighted ; so it was still dimmer twilight there when Esterel presently entered noiselessly. She stood still a moment—to watch her lover's thoughtful face, which the firelight showed her plainly. As she paused before she drew nearer to him, she thought of that day when she had found him in the wood ; that first day on which they had met after he had lost Marian. Perhaps something in his attitude recalled that day. The whole scene became present to her, nothing omitted. She saw the tall flowered stalk of blue campanula he held then trampled under his foot. She heard the stir and rustle in the beech boughs as the startled squirrel climbed higher over his head : she remembered how a sunbeam, which had pierced the leafy screen and fallen on that uncovered head, had shown her, for the first time, that his hair was getting grey. Little things she did not know that she had noticed then were all present to her now. She believed that he was thinking of that same day, reading that same scene in the fire ; it was with difficulty that she suppressed a cry of pain.

She did not think that she had made the slightest noise as she moved towards him. But does not the silent fall of an unseen foot sometimes make the earth and air vibrate, and our being vibrate with it? Do we not often feel and know a presence that we neither hear nor see. Perhaps it was thus with Mr. Hilhouse now; he looked up suddenly, a full look of love dawning in his eyes as they met hers: then he sprang up with a joyous word of welcome. Putting her in the low chair he had been occupying, he settled himself on the rug at her feet. Caressing the hand he had kept in his, he said,—

“They have kept you from me cruelly. I thought they were going to do so even to-night. I was feeling very surly, but trying to console myself with the recollection that after to-morrow no one could have a right to keep you from me.”

“Of what were you thinking?” she asked, “a few moments ago, when I came in? It was not of this then.”

She put her disengaged hand upon his head and leant forward to look into his face.

“A few moments ago I was thinking of Marian Fay,” he answered frankly. “I was thinking of the wonder of it: the wonder that she should have thrown away what you, my princess, prize! That you should prize what a simple child like Marian threw away! The marvels of love are indeed past finding out!” He was looking full in her face; startled by a sudden change that came over it, he asked, “What is it, Esterel? What is the matter, dearest?”

“Only that I think my heart is breaking!” she said, softly.

Perhaps because he should not see her face, she lightly leant her cheek upon his head. In this attitude she remained a few moments; he covering her hand with kisses and murmuring soothing words.

Presently Esterel, lifting her head, looked him in the face again, asking solemnly,—

"You call me *dearest*—am I dearest? Are you sure you love me wholly? Me first and best of all women?"

"Am I sure! How can you ask me? What can I swear by? I love you, you first and best of all women! you only, you wholly!"

She could not doubt; the passion of the tone and of the look carried conviction. She sighed a long, low sigh. Was it of sorrow or content?

"If Marian were to come back and say she loved you still? If I were to give you up to Marian and go away and try to bear it?"

"You would pain me with pain as bitter as death, and long as life," he broke in, impetuously, "and you would do no good to Marian. I cannot love and unlove at will. And I love you, Esterel; with love such as I never felt for poor little Marian—love such as I never felt before nor can ever feel again."

"Lady Winstay has let her find out that Marian is in London. This knowledge is troubling her," he thought. "Are you satisfied, you strangest and dearest questioner?" he asked aloud.

She bowed her head down upon his again, and there was a long silence; broken, by-and-by, by Esterel's saying dreamily,—

"You could not love a woman whom you despised? And you would despise a woman who had deceived you?"

It would seem as if those words, coupled with the hint of Mrs. Fay's letter, might have suggested suspicion of the truth: but Esterel, in her lover's imagination, moved quite above suspicion; and it happened that, instead of suspicion of the truth, thoughts of passages in his past life were suggested to his mind by Esterel's words: it was recollections of these which toned his answer.

"I could not love a woman whom I despised? No, certainly. But I might not necessarily despise a woman who had deceived me. The how and why of such deceit so largely

affects the question. One instance of deceit, one spoken or acted lie, may often be forgiven ; nay, sometimes, for such, a woman has been only loved the more ; in tender pity of the weakness that drove her to it as a last resource. But a long course of deception, or of concealment of the truth, carried on with the remorseless cruelty of which some women are capable, is quite a different matter ; is not to be forgiven, would turn the fondest love into the bitterest contempt and hate."

"Is not to be forgiven, would turn the fondest love to the bitterest contempt and hate." Esterel repeated this shuddering. "And how do women feel ? I wonder ; and how do they bear to live, when they find love turned to contempt and hate ? " she asked.

"They bear to live excellently well. Such women do not feel anything much," he answered. "Such women cannot love much. Anything of what such women are, you can have no idea ! "

"How can you know ? " she asked ; "you may be quite wrong. I think women may be wicked, and yet love with all their being. How should you know what women can or cannot do ? "

He laughed half sadly, half bitterly.

"How can *you* know, my innocent dreamer ? I might well say. Alas ! I know too much of the world, and of the wickedness both of men and women. Some day you shall hear, if you wish it, all the story of my life. But why do we talk of such things now ? Let us think of the fair future, not of the past. You are shaking, my darling ! Why is this ? Is it cold or some fanciful fear ? What do you fear ? "

"To lose you ! " she answered—"to lose you even at this last hour ! "

He laughed a low, happy laugh.

"Most beautiful and incomprehensible girl ! " he said. "You have not learnt to love perfectly yet ; though you love me so far too well. It seems to me that all your past has been so much a dream, Esterel, that the life to which you are

gradually waking appears to you strange and full of fear. I shall make it my study, my dear endeavour, to wake you softly—and only to the sweet realities of life in love. Learn to rest all your burdens here,” he added, drawing her into his arms, and pressing her to his breast. “Even the inexplicable burden of being you may rest here; where, heaven grant, your whole existence shall find rest.”

But, even now—while he held her so fondly and so close—she said, with the quietness of a great despair,—

“I feel that I *shall* lose you! I feel that the end is coming! I feel that you are being drawn from me; you from me, or I from you, which is it? Which it is, it does not matter; but something is between us; something that widens and pushes us farther apart. Hold me closer, tighter! Ah!”

In the last words was something wilder than the quiet, almost dreamy, despair with which she had spoken the first. He felt that she shuddered convulsively: he saw that her eyes were fixed; looking, over his shoulder, towards the door. He would have turned his head to discover what it was she looked at; but suddenly she threw her arms round his neck, and pressed his face against her breast.

“It is not for you! You shall not look!” she cried. After a few moments her arms relaxed their hold, and she fell back in her chair.

He sprang up, and went quickly to the door. It stood half open, and he believed that it had before been pushed to; even if not latched: but, looking into the ante-room and up the stairs, he saw no one.

He returned, sorrowfully, to Esterel; a great dread for her was growing upon him. Kneeling by her, he strove, with tenderest words and caresses, to soothe and reassure her.

The first question she asked him—after a long blank of silence and stillness—was,

“Would you like to have a mad wife? a wife who sees ghosts in the day-time? Indeed, I think I am going mad,

and I think you had better not marry me. I would tell you to find Marian and to marry *her* to-morrow ; but Marian is dead ; I have seen her ghost. If Marian is dead and Esterel is mad—— You are shrinking from me already——”

“Hush ! hush !” he said, chidingly. “Mad or not mad, I want you, you Esterel ; mad or not mad, I would marry you. But this is nothing, this passing phantasy, whatever it was. Your brain is over-wrought ; indeed, I have often shuddered thinking of the sort of life you have led at the Hall ; of the vigils you have kept alone in those desolate chambers. You have tried your health and your mind fearfully. Many a stronger, but less beautifully balanced organization would have given way, physically and mentally, under such trials. All this must and shall be changed in the new life that begins for us to-morrow.”

“To-morrow !” she echoed, in a tone of gentle, melancholy mockery.

“To-morrow !” he repeated, joyfully and firmly.

“Hold me close now !” she whispered. “To-morrow will not come.”

Just then Lady Winstay entered.

“Mr. Downside !” she said ; her voice was shrill with imperative anxiety. “Is Mr. Downside here ?”

“I have not seen him,” Mr. Hilhouse answered.

“*You* are here, Herbert ; I did not know it.” Lady Winstay’s tone was one of relief. “This room is quite dusky : just ring for lights, please,” she added.

When the lights came, Lady Winstay looked sharply from one face to another ; on Esterel’s she saw little but an expression of extreme exhaustion.

“I am quite sorry, Esterel, to torment you any more,” she said. “But the young person who has brought home your travelling-dress is waiting ; you had better just slip it on to make sure all is right : she is waiting in your bed-room. I have not seen her ; but I told them to send her up there.”

“All will be right enough,” Mr. Hilhouse interrupted.

"Indeed, Rosa, you have half killed this poor child already," he continued, looking down upon Esterel with most solicitous fondness. "She is thoroughly overdone. I wish, instead of bothering her about trying on more dresses, you could persuade her to go to bed soon, and take something to ensure a good night's rest. Let the dresses fit ill or well, she will please me well enough!"

"You will reign supreme to-morrow, no doubt," answered Lady Winstay pettishly. "But to-day is my day. Come, Esterel." Pushing Mr. Hilhouse aside unceremoniously, she bent over Esterel and whispered, "You *must* come. Mrs. Fay is here, in your sitting-room; I did not like to leave her anywhere else. She *would* see you, or him. You must come." She half helped, half compelled Esterel to rise, and led her towards the door.

At the door Esterel paused.

"Do you want me? Shall I come with you?" asked Lady Winstay. "I thought I had better not," she added, with sharp significance.

Not paying any heed to Lady Winstay, Esterel returned to the part of the room where Mr. Hilhouse stood—a brow of suspicion and discontent bent on his cousin.

"You did not wish me good-night. Good night, good-by!" she said. She held her arms out to him; then, putting them round his neck, she lifted her face to his, as a child might—a child who has been naughty, who has been chidden, and is penitent. As he pressed her to him he felt that she was shaken by a great sob, though her eyes were tearless. When he released her, without speaking another word, she went away.

"Pretty well for a wild, shy girl like Esterel," commented Lady Winstay bitterly; her anxiety was showing itself in crossness. Turning upon her cousin, she saw that rapturous delight and uneasy wonder were struggling in his mind.

"What did she mean by that 'good-by,' spoken in such a tone of resignation and of heartfelt sadness?" he was asking himself.

“ Does she often favour you with such demonstrations ? ”
Lady Winstay demanded.

“ Rosa, your manner to her was most unkind. Something is the matter with her ; I wish you could find out what—in a gentle way : she needs a gentle friend to-night. If she does not sleep to-night, I am sure she will be ill to-morrow. If you ever cared anything for me, *do* take care of her now, Rosa. She is more precious to me than I can tell.”

“ With one thing and another I am fairly worried to death,” broke in Lady Winstay, petulantly. “ *If* I ever cared anything for you ! oh, Herbert ! ”

“ Don’t cry, pray. I hear Lord Winstay coming, and you know he does not admire reddened eyes.”

“ I must go and see if Mr. Downside is with him,” said Lady Winstay, quickly recovering from the impending attack of sentiment. “ Do amuse Lord Winstay for a little while ; a game of chess, perhaps,” she added, as she left the room.

Meeting Lord Winstay on the stairs, she said,—

“ Do amuse Herbert—a game of chess, perhaps ; he is so nervous and fidgety to-night. Mr. Downside not come in ! that is provoking ! ”



CHAPTER XXXV.

SAVED OR LOST ?

ESTEREL went up the stairs slowly ; helping herself to mount by holding the balustrade ; letting her feet linger reluctantly on each step. In the same slow, lingering way she passed along the passages to the door of her rooms : her sitting-room was immediately over that in which she had parted from Mr. Hilhouse.

She opened the door, closed it behind her, and was face to face with Mrs. Fay. Mrs. Fay, no longer meek, and half heart-broken ; but indignant at wrong done to the name, fame,

and happiness of her child, and believing herself face to face with the doer of that wrong.

"Not quite too late, you see, Miss Esterel!" she said, with a fire and flash no one would have looked to see on that mild face. "They told me downstairs the wedding would be to-morrow; but, 'Not so sure, don't make so sure,' I said. You look more fit for burial than bridal, young lady," she added, with momentary pity. "But I won't spare you unless you tell me where my Marian is. You wonder how I have found you out, perhaps. Ever since you told me you were going to be married to my girl's lover, my head has been working, and working, and little by little I come to be sure. You came to Marian's window that night! Oh, weren't you wicked to let us think it could have been a man that came? I learnt from your maid of a beautiful dress that you got all wet and dragged the night you hurt your shoulder. I know it all! I know it all! No use to hide Marian any longer. Where is she? Tell me, where is she?"

Esterel had sat down because she could not stand; she sat motionless; she listened to all this and more, with no word of remonstrance, nor of denial. Only at the question she shook her head, and said,—

"I know no more than you where Marian is. You told me she was in London, I know no more than that."

Mrs. Fay not believing this—believing that Esterel had hidden Marian, and could find her—grew more and more angry. She scolded louder and louder, threatening to send for Mr. Hilhouse, to let the whole house know: ending all her scoldings by the question, "Where is Marian?"

To which at last Esterel whispered the answer,—

"Mrs. Fay, I think that Marian is dead; I think that I saw her spirit just now."

Mrs. Fay paused, and turned pale; then she cried,—

"Your heart is hard and cruel, indeed, when you can try to cheat a mother with such a lie! When you can sit there with no more heart or feeling than a stone, when a mother is

crying to you for her child!—Oh, Miss Esterel, dear Miss Esterel, forgive me ! ” she cried now, with a sudden change of manner,—“ I have spoken as I shouldn’t to your mother’s daughter ; but I seem to know that Marian’s heart is breaking : I must find her before it breaks. Have pity on me ! No one knows where she is but you. Let me find her ! then, if she chooses, we will go quietly home, and you can be married to-morrow. Marian would do this, or anything, for you : only tell me, where is Marian ? Let me find her.”

Again Esterel shook her head ; then she bowed her face down into her hands—bowing herself before the storm ; feeling that she had no heart, nor sense, nor fear, nor hope.

At that moment the curtain between this room and Esterel’s bed-room was pulled aside. Esterel had forgotten the young person from the dressmaker’s who was waiting there with the dress she was to wear on her bridal journey to-morrow. Now, having pulled aside the curtain, the young girl came into the room.

With one word, “ Mother,” she flew to Mrs. Fay’s side ; with one word, “ Marian,” she was clasped in her mother’s arms.

Esterel lifted up her face and looked on—looked on at first as if at a scene in which she had no interest nor concern.

For some moments the silence of the room was only broken by the sounds of sobs and kisses, and inarticulate murmurings : the mother’s murmurings over her recovered child, her only child.

Mrs. Fay was the first to break the silence ; crying to Esterel, with an accent of heart-rending reproach,—

“ You could keep her from me ! When my heart was breaking for her, and she was so close, you could keep her from me ! God pity you ! ”

“ She did not know, mother ; she did not know : she had not seen me.”

“ No, I did not know. But I have done worse things,” Esterel answered, drearily. “ It is not worth while to defend me through this reproach, Marian. I have done worse things.”

"Indeed she did not know," Marian continued. "I did not know whose dresses we had been making. Perhaps I might have known, only that I am always thinking of other things, and don't hear the talking round me. I did not know whose dress I was bringing home to-night. The servant I saw downstairs told me to come up here. I did not go high enough at first. I opened the door of a room downstairs by mistake, but it was nearly dark, and I did not see who was in the room. I knew nothing till I heard your voice, mother, as I sat in there waiting. I listened till I could not bear to listen any longer, for it seemed as if my heart would burst. Now, mother," she said, entreatingly, "have pity on poor Miss Esterel. Let us go away quietly before any one knows."

"Go away quietly as if we had done wrong! Go away quietly, and not right you, Marian!"

"Yes: come, mother, pray come! I am so happy, so happy to have you: I want nothing else; nobody but you and father." She began to sob as if her heart would break, hiding her face in her mother's lap. "You and father will know it all!" she added, presently looking up. "There is no need for any one else to know why I went away. Come, mother! Are you not glad enough to have me safe and well, to be able to forgive her, mother?"

"Safe and well!" said Mrs. Fay, taking the altered face—the pale, thin little face—between her hands. "You're so changed I should hardly have known you, child. No, Marian, I cannot go away by stealth, and take you home as if I were ashamed of you. I must have you righted, Marian. Are you content to leave the lover who's been stolen from you to think any evil he pleases of you, child?"

Marian's head drooped, but she answered,—

"He will not think evil of me; he will only think I did not love him. I know now that I did wrong to go away; my wrong tempted others on to evil. I ought to have waited, trusting to God to bring all right. For him to know the truth would do no end of harm now, and give him such cruel pain;

for, mother, I know that he loves her dearly. I know it, mother ! Loves her more than he ever loved me. How could he help it, mother ? ”

“ Marian is right,” said Esterel. “ To give me up would pain him cruelly. He loves me. Do you envy me, Marian ? ”

“ No—oh, no ! ” shuddered Marian. She noticed the wild glitter of Esterel’s eyes, and feared for her : those eyes looked the more terribly unnatural, because the face in which they shone was literally corpse-like.

“ Not even though he loves me ! But, Marian, we are wrong when we say he loves me. How can he ? He does not know *me*. Does not love *me* ! I am false and wicked ; he loves a woman who is good, and true, and pure. When he knows me, Marian, it might not pain him to give me up.”

“ Mother ! let us go. Miss Esterel, I will pray for you ; that is all I can do.”

“ Do you counsel me to go on keeping my bad secret, Marian, *for his sake* ? Do not think of me ; for it burns up my brain, and gnaws at my heart, and I would gladly be rid of it. But, for his sake, shall I go on keeping it, Marian ? ”

“ Do not ask me ! Do not ask me ! ” cried Marian, in an agony. “ Pray to God, ask Him ! ”

“ My lover was never worthy to be your lover, you sweet little saint ; or he would never have forgotten you and loved me. He does love me, does he not, Marian ? ”

“ Yes—oh, yes. I saw you together once when you did not see me. He loves you better than he ever loved me. Mother ! come away with me ! I cannot bear it ! And our being here excites her. Come away,” whispered tortured Marian, sick to swooning.

“ I have cried out that I could not bear it,” said Esterel, catching those words, “ could not bear to go on keeping my wicked secret, and yet I have borne it ! But it has driven me nearly mad. Stay ! ” she cried in a voice of command, as she saw that Mrs. Fay, supporting Marian, was moving towards the door. “ Stay ! you must not take away the bride. Mr.

Hilhouse is to be married to-morrow. He shall know all, that will be fair. Then he shall choose between us. He will find me wicked and ugly, and he will choose Marian."

"Dearest Miss Esterel!" Marian said soothingly, going up to Esterel and taking her hands, "be calm, dearest Miss Esterel! Tell him all you did for his love, that will be best. Tell him how you sinned for his love. But let us go. He will still love you; I know he will still love you. Let us go quietly; tell him all quietly. I shall be happy with father and mother in the dear old home. You will make him happy as I never could have done. It was good of him to love me, but it was all a mistake."

As she finished speaking, having kissed them first, she let go Esterel's hands, and drew her mother towards the door. At that moment Lady Winstay tapped at it, and Marian drew back to let her pass in. Then Esterel, going to the door, closed it and stood before it. Lady Winstay, Marian, and Mrs. Fay were her prisoners.

On first recognizing Marian, Lady Winstay stood aghast; then she wrung her hands. She so far gave things up for lost that words failed her.

Esterel said,—

"Yes, this is Marian. Two brides are here, you see, and there is but one wedding dress and but one bridegroom. So he must choose between us. He will choose Marian, and the dress is too long for her; so Marian must be married as she is, and the dress may serve as my shroud."

Esterel laughed—a laugh of soft, silvery music, and yet it curdled the blood of those who heard it.

"Lady Winstay! Do something for her!" entreated Marian, "do something to calm her, and let us go quietly away."

"Go, for heaven's sake, you dear good girl!" exclaimed Lady Winstay, catching at hope in Marian's words; words that seemed to her so wonderful, if Esterel had wronged her, that they staggered her in her conviction of Esterel's guilt.

But Esterel kept her place by the door and said,—

“They shall not go. I sent Marian away secretly once. I will not let her go away secretly now.”

Lady Winstay entreated, remonstrated, threatened: Esterel kept her place by the door, and answered to everything,—

“They shall not go!”

“This is madness—frenzy,” cried Lady Winstay. “You will repent when the fit is past. You will find yourself overwhelmed with shame. Control yourself, be reasonable, and all will be well.”

“You think me mad already,” answered Esterel. “But I am not mad yet; though I feel it coming on. Do not hinder me, Rosa, from doing what I wish. Marian, come with me.” She drew Marian’s hand through her arm and held it firmly with her hand. Turning to Mrs. Fay, she added, “You, Mrs. Fay, follow us, and you shall see your daughter righted.”

To oppose Esterel further in her present state was useless, Marian felt; she suffered herself to be led along: almost more dead than alive, was the poor child. Her mother followed close.

Lady Winstay rushed down the stairs before them; determining on one effort more—determining, if possible, to keep them from entering the room where Lord Winstay and Mr. Hilhouse were; if possible, to get Mr. Hilhouse out of the way before he should have seen Marian.

It was no use. Esterel followed swiftly. Lady Winstay had done no more than to sound an alarm by her abrupt entrance and her frightened face. Esterel, with Marian clinging to her arm, crossed the threshold. To Lord Winstay the scene that followed was a perplexed riddle, to be solved afterwards.

Esterel—removing Marian’s hand from her arm now—went up to her lover, her bridegroom, her almost husband, and touching him on the shoulder, for he stood amazed and motionless, pointed to Marian.

Poor Marian! standing there in her work-a-day dress;

full under the blaze of the chandelier; looking so out of harmony with anything in that splendid room; the pitiless light showing how the freshness and bloom were worn off her young face, the roundness off her figure.

Poor Marian! Yet why pity one who—spite of all her trouble; spite of the sinking sickness that again came over her; spite of the pain it was to her to be thus gazed at in dismay, as an unwelcome apparition, by the man to whom she had given her whole heart for ever:—why pity one who, spite of all this, could lift up such a face—a face from which shone out a holy light of love, truth, trust,—a face calm to endure her own suffering and compassionate with tenderest compassion for the suffering of others?

“Marian!” Mr. Hilhouse uttered. “It is Marian,” he added, half doubtful of the fact.

“It is Marian,” Esterel assured him.

After a few moments of embarrassment, he went up to Marian and took her hand; smiling down upon her kindly, he said,—

“When you found you could not love me, child, you should not have been afraid to tell me so: no need to run away.”

Marian was dumb. The kind words were cold, and seemed to make her sick heart shiver: she looked down for fear her eyes should speak.

“Marian did love you,” Esterel said. “And Marian loved me: and I loved you first, before Marian loved you or you loved Marian. Because she loved us both, and we both loved you, she let me persuade her to go away. It was I—I only, who made her go. It was I who was seen at her window that night. I only could have made her leave you.”

“Was this so?” asked Mr. Hilhouse of Marian; after a pause—a pause in which he had listened for some one to contradict Esterel’s wild words.

Marian had no words with which to lie: so she was dumb

still ; and still she looked down for fear her eyes should speak.

“ Good heavens ! Poor child ! and you have suffered exile all this time ! and you have loved me all this time ! Poor, patient child ! And I —— ” Looking from Marian to Esterel, from Esterel to Marian, he groaned, and said, “ Ah ! this is pain and humiliation ! This is punishment, indeed.”

“ Your choice is made. Take Marian ! ” Esterel said. “ Love Marian.”

At those words, he turned upon Esterel, and grasped her hand.

“ My choice is made,” he said, “ and I abide by it—I abide by it and I will not let you go ! ” He drew Esterel to him ; putting an arm round her to hold her fast.

His own feeling towards Esterel then he did not understand. Did he take her to him for his punishment or for hers ? Did he take her to him out of pity ? Or because, as yet, he realized her love, and saw how agony of remorse was maddening her ; and did not realize to what extent she had been guilty ? Or did he take her to him merely because, in fact, he loved her ;—her, as she was, whatever she was ; her, innocent or guilty ?

“ ‘ Take Marian ’ indeed ! ” he echoed, bitterly. “ Fickle as I have been, I cannot love and unlove in a moment. ‘ Love Marian ! ’ Am I fit to love a saint ? My final choice is made, and rests on you.” He looked on Esterel with a face in which supreme passions—of love, anger, and despair—seemed to struggle.

“ Let us go home,” moaned Marian, moving towards her mother. “ Miss Esterel will let us go home now ; why should we stay longer ? You see, Miss Esterel, he loves you spite of all : that is right, that is best ; but I—I want to go home. What should I stay for ? He does not love me, and I do not love him—your husband.” The poor girl shuddered.

“ She mistakes,” said Esterel, softly ; looking up into the

face of her lover, who still held her firmly. "*She* does love you still. It is *I* who no longer love you. There is no love, nor life left in me: no pleasure and no pain. I feel nothing: I want nothing—nothing but darkness and death."

"Esterel, be quiet!" he said, speaking chidingly, as if to a child; then he added, almost fiercely, "Do not heap humiliation on humiliation, misery on misery. We have both sinned. I love you still, and I will keep you."

"You cannot love me still. You said that—let me see, I think I can remember your very words—you said that 'a long course of deceit, a long concealment of the truth, carried on with remorseless cruelty, would turn the fondest love to the bitterest contempt and hate.' Your words painted my crime and my punishment. You cannot love me now: and, even if you have sinned, to marry a mad wife, whom you do not love, is too terrible a punishment. I am not mad yet; but it is coming on. You cannot think how hard I was; how cruel, how crafty; persuading Marian it would be more faithful faithfulness to leave you, more loving love to give you up."

Mr. Hilhouse had covered his eyes with his hand while she spoke; still holding her to him with the other arm. Esterel pulled down his hand now, saying,—

"You need not do that. Put down your hand and let me go. I will go out of your sight. I know I am hateful to your sight. You hold me cruelly tight, for you hate me. After all," she added—after a pause of what seemed like reflection—"I do not know that you can be married to-morrow. Marian, faithful little Marian, is, you think, too good for you. Esterel, the white witch, is, I know, too wicked for you. So you must wait, Herbert: you must wait."

Throwing both arms round Esterel now, he pressed her to him; holding her face against his breast, that she might speak no more such harrowing words.

"Somebody stop this! Somebody stop this, or we shall all go mad!" Lady Winstay cried, distractedly.

Should Mr. Hilhouse—to point the moral of this story—

have spurned Esterel, and fallen a loving penitent at Marian's feet ?

Strange as it may seem, his love for Esterel had been the purer and less selfish passion. In proposing to wed Marian he had thought chiefly of what she would be to him. In proposing to marry Esterel he had thought more of what he could be to her.

Holding her fast—and now she leans heavily against him, and voluntarily kept her face hidden in his breast—he said,

“ Even if I could love and unlove, as I might glove and unglove my hand, Marian is—as Esterel has said—too good for me. Let me—penitent as I am for the inconstancy and infirmity of will which has wrought all this wrong—try to make some amends in striving to heal this wounded spirit. Am I not right in this ? Right, in spite of all, to take Esterel for my wife ? ” He asked this of Marian. Marian had lifted up her head and fixed her eyes upon him. He felt impelled to seek her sanction.

“ It seems so to me,” she said, humbly, and yet firmly.

“ And you, Marian, you forgive us both ? ”

“ Indeed, I do ; as I hope to be forgiven. I was wrong, too : I have felt that since. I will pray for your happiness. God has ordered all for the best, in spite of our all being wrong. Mother, at last we may go.” The accent betokened her deadly weariness.

Lady Winstay showered kisses, and blessings, and offers of hospitality upon them as they went. Lord Winstay, slowly awaking to the meaning of the scene, accompanied them to the hall ; and himself put them into a cab which he beckoned to the door, touching Marian's hand reverently.

Esterel now lifted up her head ; looking round perplexedly, seeking for Marian, she said,—

“ You are very good to me, Herbert ; and Marian—where is Marian gone ?—was very good to me ; and, if I should find, ever find what I am losing, it might be best for it to be as you say. Where is my father ? I am glad he was not here.

Send for him now. Perhaps he can find what I have lost."

"What is it, Esterel, that you have lost?" Mr. Hilhouse asked.

"Why, your love for one thing; and my heart for another: but neither is what I mean. Send for my father, I will tell him what I mean."

"Esterel, I swear that I love you still."

"When you loved me you did not swear," she answered, quietly. In despair he left her—to seek Mr. Downside. Mr. Downside, happily spared the scene just past, returned in time to catch sight of Marian and Mrs. Fay as they were driven from the door. A few words sufficed to explain what had occurred. He hurried to Esterel; to find his worst fear, his most secret dread, realized.

She met him directly he entered the room. Looking up into his face, she said,—

"I have lost it! I have felt it going, little by little, day after day. I have stretched after it, and so kept it a little longer; but I cannot reach any further. It is gone! Everybody has gone, and left me shut out. I have been trying to find the door; but I have lost even myself. That is pleasant. I have lost even myself." With that she fainted in his arms. He held her in them jealously. Refusing assistance he carried her to a sofa.

Standing by her he looked Mr. Hilhouse in the face, and said,—“In this affliction that has come upon her, I only will guard her. Esterel! my child, my own, own child!” he murmured over her. Then, looking up again, “It is true, she is my own daughter. It is no use to keep anything secret now. She is my own daughter. Her mother—whom I held as my wife then, who was known as my wife afterwards—was taken from me, and driven well nigh mad with grief before this child was born. I am no stepfather: she is my flesh and blood. In her madness—for she is mad—my arms only shall be her prison.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MR. DOWNSIDE'S STORY.

HOPE as they might for what the morrow would bring, it was to bring nothing for which they hoped. Esterel was beyond doubt mad : quiet and gentle, but mad.

There was this happy feature in her madness, that through all its clouds and darkness, she seemed conscious of some great relief ; of freedom from some long-borne load.

She asked so constantly for Marian, that Marian was at last sent for. She came at once ; she put herself aside ; tried to forget her sick longing for home and rest ; and, having won her mother's consent, was installed as Esterel's companion and nurse, for as long as she should be needed.

Esterel's physical prostration was complete ; in this some of the physicians summoned to consult upon her case, found a hopeful sign. Mind and body, having given way together, might possibly be built up and restored to health together, they said. They all agreed in recommending a change so complete that there could be no danger of any present scene being associated with things of the past ; all agreed in urging compliance with every caprice and avoidance of all excitement.

It was settled that as soon as Esterel could travel, Mr. Downside should take her to Italy ; Marian Fay going with them. Poor little Marian ! how her heart sank within her at this prospect no one ever knew.

It had been proved that Mr. Hilhouse—even by his presence under the same roof, when she did not see nor hear him—exercised a prejudicial influence on Esterel. The only time on which she had seen him she had been thrown into a state of violent excitement : this was the only time when she had shown any violence. It was, therefore, impossible that he should accompany them abroad. This was a heavy blow to him : feeling now as if all his life were torn up by the roots,

to have devoted himself to Esterel would have been some trifling solace and satisfaction ; and this he might not do.

He could only exact the most solemn promises that he should be kept minutely informed of Esterel's state ; that, on her lightest expression of a wish to see him, he should be summoned.

"You will remember," Mr. Hilhouse said, on the last evening before Esterel's departure, "that though, for her good, I yield her to you entirely now, I regard her as my future wife : all my thoughts and hopes centre in her."

They were alone on that last evening : Mr. Downside stood, wavering to and fro, gazing into the fire ; Mr. Hilhouse leaned against the chimney-piece.

"You have been generous to me," Mr. Downside presently began ; speaking with a difficult, half-stifled utterance. "You have been very generous and forbearing ; giving me no word of deserved reproach. If you care to listen to it, you have a right to hear something of the story of my life."

"I wish to hear nothing that it would pain you to tell. About the past I am wholly indifferent."

"One pain confounds another ; I can quite well speak, and what I have to say you ought to know," he answered. Then—not looking up, but seeming to read in the fire, word for word, all he said—he continued : "Two things I kept from you that any suitor of my daughter's should have known : that Esterel is not, according to English law, a legitimate child (of this she is as ignorant as you were ; though I have thought sometimes that she suspected my true relation to her), and that I have long lived face to face with the fear, now realized, that she might one day go mad. I have been wrong always : all through my life, it seems to me, wronging and defrauding most those whom I loved most. But I have defrauded myself, perhaps, chiefly : defrauding myself of a daughter's love. I was afraid to tell her the truth : afraid it would make her love me even less. I have been a coward always ; for myself and for others. Having said so much of Esterel's mother, I must say more."

He paused, and seemed to struggle with himself before he could go on. "As an angel in heaven now she can hardly be purer than she was here on earth," he muttered.

"I was travelling in Spain, as a young man, in my father's life-time, when I met her first." He said, in a louder tone, "Riding carelessly down a mountain-road, through the forests of Asturias—cheated by the familiar foliage of the oaks into a dream of home—I met with an accident; my horse fell and crushed my ankle under him. I lay helpless. As if it were only yesterday, I remember all the scene. As I lay I watched a gay procession winding up towards me. Young girls, mounted on mules, coming from a fête in the town below, attended by servants. Just as things were growing misty, for I was faint with pain, a sweet grave face, which I loved from that moment, bent over me. One of those young girls had dismounted; she ordered that I should be placed upon her own mule and taken to her home. There my hurt detained me, day after day: week after week. Quite openly I sought and, at length, won her love. Then, without a word of warning to her or to me, she was suddenly and secretly—while I was still living in her father's house—sent to a convent.

"Her father briefly and sternly told me that I should never again see his daughter: and that, being no longer lame, I had better at once return to my own home and kindred. I should never have known where they had hidden my betrothed if her mother had not favoured me. Through her mother I found out where she was immured, and managed to communicate with her. After a time, she escaped, and we fled together.

"The desperate nature of the chase that would, we knew, be given, made it impossible that I should then marry her with all the formalities necessary to make such a marriage legal. But such a ceremony as was possible passed between us. I held her as indissolubly my wife.

"One day—when some weeks of safety had taught us to feel less insecure—leaving her to rest at a mountain farm, I ventured into the town below, to purchase necessaries for a

further flight. In my absence she was carried off: her father had tracked us!

"This time all search was fruitless. Her mother warned me that my life was not secure if I continued to haunt the neighbourhood.

"After many months I went to England: only for a time, and with the hope that my departure might put those who hid my wife from me off their guard. I was welcomed home by a letter from her father, reviling me as sacrilegious and a murderer; telling me that my victim had died in giving birth to a child, that all further inquiry would be fruitless, and all search for my victim's grave vain.

"I never for a moment doubted that my wife and child were really dead.

"I had never spoken, even to my father, of this secret marriage: I never confided to anybody the cause of the misery that darkened down on my life then. My father urged me constantly to take a wife. I was a tool in his hands.

"I married, believing myself free. Free! I ought to have felt as much bound to the dead as to the living.

"Thank God, I was not happy in my marriage: thank God, I never forgot the past!

"You know, the whole world knows, what followed upon that marriage, in a few years: as to the facts, I mean. What was behind those facts, no mortal living but myself can know.

"Neither my faithful one, nor my child, was dead. Her father had lied to me.

"Again she effected her escape! When time—the lapse of months and years—had taught those who had charge of her to believe I was forgotten, and had taught her no forgetfulness—their watchfulness relaxed: then, with her little daughter, she escaped to England. What she suffered for me, what she dared in order to join me, I cannot endure to think. Surely she has won a martyr's crown, and a high place in heaven, if faithful human love avail there!

"She knew my address at the Hall well, for I had often

talked to her of the old house which was to be her English home. From London she wrote to me—wrote, of course, as a wife to a husband; wrote as if we had parted yesterday: what was time—a few years—to her love? Her letter was opened and read by the old priest, Lady Maria's chaplain, before I received it: I was from home when it came. He copied it, and delivered a copy to Lady Maria. I found that copy in her missal; she left it there: I managed to secure it before any other eyes had seen it. Motive? the priest had motive enough—for a priest. Because I was a Protestant he had opposed the marriage: now he wished to bring about a divorce, which should secure to Lady Maria—and through her to himself—the guardianship of her children and of their inheritance.

“She, my faithful angel, had to learn my faithlessness—to hear of all the misery and crime that followed!

“After I brought her to the Hall—my second wife, people called her!—her settled melancholy deepened to madness. It was at her wish that we lived at the Hall. I think she had some fancy, sweet soul, to save me by this penance.

“A coward all through—even in spite of all these fearful lessons—I have continued to be a coward to the last! You know my story now.”

He did not raise his eyes when he had ceased to speak; but still stood motionless, save for that swaying and wavering to and fro, which was becoming more and more habitual. His eyes still bent upon the fire, he still seemed to be reading in it the mournful story of the past. By-and-by, heaving a deep sigh, he turned to leave the room. It was late: past midnight. As if he had forgotten that it was to him he had been speaking, he appeared startled to see Mr. Hilhouse—who followed him to the door, opening it for him.

“I am sorry,” he said mournfully, as he took the hand stretched out to him, “that the blight of our lives should have fallen upon yours.”

“It is not undeserved,” Mr. Hilhouse answered, gravely:

“Not undeserved: in what has passed during these last nine months, I have been far from blameless.”

“But for Marian Fay,” thought Mr. Hilhouse, as he threw himself into a chair before the dying fire when he was left alone, “I could not let them go without me. He is so weak and so incompetent a guardian—hardly less helpless than her he guards. Marian’s quiet sense, Marian’s loving faithfulness, are what I look to for her safety. With Marian, Esterel is safe, as with a guardian angel.”

All night, Mr. Hilhouse occupied that chair: awake and brooding over things past and things to be.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

TAKEN HOME.

In the spring Esterel was brought home to Bramblebridge. This was what nobody had contemplated, what nobody thought desirable; but her wish was urgent, and urged incessantly. It was impossible to doubt that she was dying; and with all the sad passionate strength of a dying desire, her heart seemed to turn towards Bramblebridge: to die where her mother had died, to lie beside her mother, this was her longing.

So they brought her home.

She could not now be called mad: the chief trace left by her mental affliction was a partial loss of memory—of the memory of recent events—accompanied by a preternatural clearness of vision (for it seemed absolute vision), in recalling the scenes and incidents of her childhood. She appeared also to arrive at the knowledge of what those around her were thinking and feeling, in a mysterious way: and sometimes she startled them by showing knowledge of things concerning which no one had spoken to her—of which they imagined her to be quite ignorant. The story that her father had told Mr.

Hilhouse had never been told her in words ; yet she seemed to know it all.

Into these brief months that she might yet have to live, she seemed to try to pour all the love and tenderness she had owed her father, and had not paid, for years. After she was brought to Bramblebridge this was more than ever apparent. She would lie quiet and happy for hours, if she might rest her cheek upon his hand, or hold it in hers ; she seemed to know instinctively that just these signs of fondness were peculiarly sweet and dear to him.

During all the months she had been away she had not once named Mr. Hilhouse, nor had he been named in her presence.

As she grew more collected she often had long fits of sadness ; sometimes of desperate depression : but, while she then accused herself of great wickedness and cruelty, she evidently had no memory of how it was that she had sinned : unless to some suspicion of the truth was owing the exceeding lovingness of her manner to Marian.

She delighted to have Marian to read to her ; and sometimes, when she was well enough, she read herself—from the little Testament her father had laid upon her pillow one terrible night, long ago—the little Testament that had been her mother's.

She often spoke of her death ; but only in whispers, and to Marian, for fear of paining her father.

“ I would live if I could,” she said. “ I would ask God to let me live ; only I must not ask anything but that His will may be done. My father seems to want me : I would live for his sake, and I want to learn more from this book. I want to be good and to do good : yes, I would live if I could ; but I feel I cannot. How long do you think it will be, Marian ? ”

“ God only knows,” was Marian's answer, as the tears coursed down her sweet, worn face.

Marian's mother lived at the Hall now, as housekeeper and manager. Luke Fay had been killed in an encounter with

poachers just before Marian came home. Poor Marian! her face told its tale of trouble now; but it also told its tale of how her troubles were endured, and of what it was that made her burden light. Perhaps there never was a face expressing more clearly absolute faith, pure love, than did little Marian's.

Mr. Hilhouse had come to the Hall as soon as Esterel was brought there. Was he or was he not to see her, became the question? Whether permitted to see her or no, he determined not again to leave the neighbourhood. It seemed almost as if his existence had passed out of Esterel's mind: and it was this which made it difficult to decide the question as to whether it was safe for him to see her. For this memory, and others connected with it, to be revived, might agitate her to an extent that would hasten her death; or it might—there was the faintest chance that it might—rouse her out of the gentle lethargy in which she now lay, through which she seemed each day to be sinking nearer death, and give her, for however brief a time, new life.

With trembling eagerness Mr. Hilhouse urged, nay, insisted, that the experiment should be made. If she could be roused to life, he only could rouse her, he thought. If she were dying, it was his right to be with her: he would not endure that she should die and he not see her again—that she should die and he not have had one last word of love, one last look of recognition. From day to day he was put off: till, one day, he would wait no longer: he *would* see her that day, he said.

Esterel's couch was drawn into the oriel window of the room in which stood her mother's picture. In those early June days that south oriel window seemed an epitome of all warmth, brightness, and beauty. An open lattice admitted the fragrance of flowers, and the soothing honeyed murmur of bees busy in a blossoming vine. On this day Esterel lay looking out: more frequently her eyes were fixed upon that portrait. She would often look at it so long and earnestly, that, her eyes growing dim with tears, it would appear to her, she told

Marian, as if the pictured figure left the wall ; as if her mother came to her and bent down over her : beneath this happy fancy her lids would close in the sweetest sleep. But to-day she lay looking out ; feeling as if she looked into the very heart of the beauty of the sweet world which she must leave so soon. While she lay thus, Marian had been combing out the hair, which, having lost little of its luxuriance, was often a trouble to its weary owner now. Brushed off the blue-veined temples and the little waxen ear, it fell over the violet cushions, almost to the ground ; a rippled cascade of golden light. Esterel's face—looking in its transparent delicacy as if the sun might literally shine through it—was dominated by those glorious eyes, which had taken of late a new and holier beauty ; so absolutely ruled by them that unless their lids were closed it was hard to see its other features. It was only when she slept that those who loved her and watched her could judge of how she wasted day by day.

Marian, sitting now at Esterel's feet, in the shadow of the violet curtain, saw a change come over her.

In a moment she was at her side.

“Are you in pain, or feeling faint ?” Marian asked. Esterel did not answer ; but she looked up into Marian's face with an expression of dumb agony dawning and then deepening over her own. Through it she seemed to be listening ; and her breathing was fast and difficult.

“It is all coming back, Marian !” she cried, at last, with a shudder. Then, after a long pause, “It is all come back. I remember.”

Her brow had contracted with pain ; but after a while it relaxed. In a few moments she smiled, and said,—

“Do not be frightened, sweet. The pain is past. It is all clear. I remember. I am glad to remember ; I can repent, I was sure I had wronged you—you, sweet darling, who have been as an angel to me ! but I could not remember how. I wish to see him, Marian, let him come.”

“Your father ? Shall I call him ? Do you want him ?”

"I always want him, my father; but I asked him to go out. I did not mean my father. Never mind, dear, you need not go; he is coming."

She closed her eyes: to sleep after a troubled waking dream, Marian thought; so she stole softly back to her seat in the shadow of the curtain.

A few seconds afterwards Mr. Downside came into the room. He whispered to Marian, and then, white and shaking, went up to Esterel.

She smiled, and said,—

"Do not be frightened about me, papa. I remember all. I know who is at the door. Let him come in."

Mr. Hilhouse came in, and Marian—who, though he had been in the house many days, had not yet seen him—went noiselessly away. Mr. Downside followed her.

Esterel stretched out her shadowy hand to him she had loved so passionately; she looked up into his face, with shadow after shadow flitting across her eyes. He held her hand in both his, and, as he looked down upon her, a suppressed sob burst from him.

He knelt beside her, and cried, while he covered her hand with kisses,—

"Live, Esterel! Esterel, my life's life, live for me!"

There was a thrill of fear and agony in his voice, and passionate anguish was in his face. Seeing her now, after so long an interval, he realized more fully than did those who were with her constantly, to what extent she was changed, and how near she was to the last great change. For a moment, he felt as if he had been deceived about her; as if all the bitterness of despair were let in upon him at once. As she gazed into his face, its anguish was mirrored in her own; for a few moments she was possessed by a supreme longing—longing for life and for power to assuage his suffering with her love.

"Esterel, if you die you take my life with you. Try to live. Oh, Esterel, try to live!" he cried again.

She laid her hand caressingly on his hair. Her anguish had passed. The shadows had flitted from over her eyes, and left her vision clear.

"I would live if I could," she said; "for my father's sake, I would live if I could. But by living I could not make you happy. Living I could not love you as I do dying. I am dying, and I love you." She paused there; then she added, "I love you: yes, I love you; but I love you, I think, as I love all things now—with a love that comes with the shadow of death. I have tried not to pray for life, or death: Marian told me it would not be right. Marian taught me to try and leave all to my Father in Heaven. If He had chosen, for my father's sake, I would have gladly lived; and for life's sake—life is very beautiful. For your sake! I do not see how I could live for you. But I feel I am not to live, and I feel so plainly that this is in all ways best. All my life has been wrong, and now all its threads are tangled, and my brain is too weak to put them right. I need to begin again, from the very beginning, as a little child; I think, somewhere, He will let me do this." She had spoken faintly, with many pauses, her fingers playing with his hair.

In an agony of love and despair, he bowed down his head; hiding his face in the folds of her dress, and smothering his sobs there.

Too exhausted to speak again directly, she suffered cruelly in this his suffering. Presently she said,—

"A little longer! Listen a little longer, in case I never see you again: I have something else to say."

He raised his head; she moved hers nearer to him, making a sign for him to take her in his arms.

"Just once, just once before I die," she murmured: and, resting her head against his breast, she closed her eyes for a few moments.

Looking up into his face, presently, "You think I loved you well," she said, then paused and sighed a long sigh. "You loved me for my love. You took that for a sign of the

greatness of my love ? ” She pointed to the scar on the back of his hand. “ It is true I would have done what I did if I had known that I should die when my lips touched the wound. But,” she lowered her voice to a whisper, “ my love was nothing to Marian’s ; she loves you always with most faithful love. I would have died for you, but I could not have done what Marian has done : she lays down her life for you day by day. She does not know it ; but she loves you always. Remember this, for my sake, when I am gone.”

“ You are not weaker than usual to-day ? ” he asked. “ You are gaining strength. Oh, Esterel, tell me that to-day is better than yesterday.”

“ Just a little weaker every day,” she said. “ Some words Marian read to me—from a book of extracts you had given her, I think,—are often in my mind,

‘ My long sickness
Of health and living now begins to mend,
And nothing brings me all things ! ’ ”

She repeated that last line lingeringly, “ ‘ And nothing brings me all things.’ ”

“ Does my father look to you much changed ? ” she asked, after a long silence ; during which he had bowed his face down upon hers, and been able to articulate nothing.

“ He is aged, looks broken and feeble,” he answered, indifferent to everything but her.

“ I think he will not be left lonely long ; but I know that you and Marian will both be very kind to him.”

“ I will be all that I can to him.”

“ And Marian is already as a daughter to him. Marian,” she murmured, then added, “ Herbert, I do not ask this nor that ; I am too weak, too ignorant of what is right ; but, oh, be something—be what you can—to Marian : comfort Marian.’ By-and-by she said, while she was still in his arms, “ You are gone a long way off.” It was true that his thoughts had strayed. “ Have I pained you ? I cannot see you out there.

Oh, Marian! Call Marian. I am sinking; hold me up. I am sinking!"

He held her closer and closer, and called for help. At his call her father and Marian came. He thought she had died in his arms: but this was not death; only a long and deadly swoon.

She lived through some few more sunny summer days. The three she loved were with her constantly.

One evening, just as they had watched the sun sink into the sea, she turned to her father with a faint cry. A few moments after, a dead face was on the old man's breast: a lifeless form enclosed within his arms.

Those who had loved Esterel best, and who looked upon her last, while they looked, could not but rejoice with fearful joy in her gain, though they turned away with hearts rent by grief for their own loss.

With death, a beauty beyond any it had worn in life had settled upon Esterel's face: her lips wore a smile of more perfect sweetness, her brow a look of more perfect calm than comes to living lips or brow.

Marian had put a lily-spray into the dead hand, and twined lily-blossoms in the golden hair. Who that looked upon her would have thought how she had sinned and suffered?

In the same manner as death sometimes wipes the traces of suffering from the face, is it sometimes mercifully permitted to efface the traces of sin and passion from the soul?



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MARIAN'S REWARD.

ESTEREL had been laid in the churchyard, by her mother's side, two years.

What were those two years to Marian? The sorrows of love, the duties of love, the endurance of love had filled them, and were still filling her life.

She had nursed her mother through her last illness. She was Mr. Downside's nurse now, during his slow decline. She endured the frequent and indifferent presence of her former lover, whom she loved: Esterel was right—there was no “loved once” with Marian: she could give up all her claims to be loved; but she could not teach herself to leave off loving.

Marian's health was broken with much grieving, and much watching. Her bloom and freshness were worn away, but what of that? Far better things were left that would not wear away: for those she loved, she was more than ever lovely; and in her child-hearted faithfulness she held the secret of perpetual youth.

Mr. Hilhouse went and came, and came and went: remembering his promise to Esterel to be what he could to her father, his visits were frequent; long or short, according to whether the old man seemed to need him more or less.

Was he quite indifferent to Marian's presence? Except as she was associated with his memories of Esterel, he truly was, for many months.

Now some men hold a few months to be long enough in which to mourn a wife whom they have loved—as they call loving. Some men say that they imperatively need something near, something of flesh and blood, to love; they say that they cannot live to love only a memory, a disembodied spirit: they say that in seeking to satisfy this need they do nothing derogatory to the reverent love and constant worship of one who is no longer flesh and blood. (It might be well for a woman to pause before, on such terms, she accepts such love: at least, if she herself is spirit, and not only flesh and blood.) For Mr. Hilhouse—if after a time he began to see Marian for herself, with eyes no longer indifferent, once more not indifferent—there was much excuse. There were so many things to draw him towards her, besides the memory of Esterel's plaintive words. Probably, what happened at last would have happened sooner, had not Marian instinctively rather shunned than sought his presence; finding tasks else-

where when he sat with Mr. Downside ; taking her brief walks when he was just come in ; keeping much to her own room when he was at the Hall. Quite instinctively Marian did this : as little, as if Esterel had been alive and he Esterel's husband, did she think of the possibility that he could again seek her love.

It was not till a visit that Mr. Hilhouse paid one autumn—more than two years after Esterel's death—that Marian began to find any difficulty in avoiding him, and to have forced upon her a consciousness of why she avoided him. During this visit his eyes were often on her, with an expression in them that, once or twice, when she met it, sent a confused sweetness and trouble through her ; sending her thoughts far back to a time when he had loved her. He, noticing the thinness of the worn cheek, perhaps believed that it was chiefly pity which drew his eyes and his thoughts so much towards her. Mr. Downside he saw was failing rapidly ; was not, he thought, likely to live through the winter ; and then what would become of this faithful, long-suffering, and loving girl ? Where could she look for a friend and protector ? These questions he rightly and naturally asked himself.

On the last evening of his visit Marian was walking up and down on the south terrace ; she had left him reading to Mr. Downside, but she had not been out long before he joined her. She would have gone in immediately, supposing that she was wanted ; but he asked her to stay, saying that their dear old friend was inclined to doze, and wanted nothing. They spoke of Mr. Downside's health : they both agreed, he gravely, Marian tearfully, that he was evidently sinking fast.

"And when he is gone, Marian !" Mr. Hilhouse said, "you will have no one left. And you, poor child, have spent yourself for others, and look now as if you needed care and tending."

"I am well," answered Marian, softly. "Well enough, I mean : I shall last as long as there is any one to want me."

"You will have no one left," he repeated, without having paid much heed to her words.

"I am not afraid to look forward," answered Marian, perhaps with just a thought of pride. It may not be for long; I shall not be unhappy."

"You resent my pity, Marian. You can live alone and not need love?" He saw that her pale face flushed suddenly at that last word, and he continued, "Yes, it is that I mean. Your heart tells you what I mean. Let things be as once they were to have been. Be my wife, Marian; when our dear friend needs you no longer, be my wife."

She deserved better, did she not, than to have thus coldly offered her (only in pity, as she thought) such a pale ghost of love? But this life not being—as we, most of us, say that we believe—the be all and end all; why do we cavil when we meet with some who have not their reward here, openly, before men's eyes?

And was his heart as cold, as merely pitiful, as he taught his voice and face to be?

Encouraged by her silence he continued, possessing himself of her hand,

"Your claims upon my tenderness, my gratitude, my esteem, my love—yes, Marian, my love—have multiplied a thousand times since then. You have everything in me to forgive, much to overlook; but you can forgive everything, overlook all. Be my wife, Marian."

He turned to her, looking, perhaps, for the roses of her blushing consent.

Marian's face was white; she drew her hand away softly; she looked at him with sad, appealing, reproachful eyes. Then she covered her face with both hands, leant against the balustrade, and burst into tears. Who shall know how bitter? Who can tell from what secret source?

He did not understand her. He said gently,

"You think I wrong *her* by such words? She wished this, Marian. Or, do you think I only pity you, and have no love

to offer ? Alas ! Marian, faithful, single-hearted as you are, I have not known how to dare tell you that I love again—love you ; but, indeed, it is so.”

“Let me go in,” sobbed Marian : “I cannot bear it.” She moved away from him, he not venturing to detain her, and went into the house.

* * * * *

“Marian, my bird,” the old man said to her, when they were alone, that evening, “you have been crying. He has spoken to you then ; what did you answer ?”

“Nothing. It seemed to break my heart that he should wish it. And yet——” Truthful Marian sought about for words in which to explain what was a mystery to herself ; she could find none, and was silent.

Mr. Downside smiled sadly.

“You love him, dear child ?”

“Always.”

“Then I think that is all you have to do with, Marian. I do not say he is worthy of you : I do not say marry him, my dear ; but it seems to me your love is all you have to do with.”

“Worthy of me ! oh, sir, it is not that !”

“I know it is not that. I know that you would have been more content to have him go on loving only the memory of our angel.”

“I feel as if I could not love him now as I have done, sir ; as I should have gone on loving him if he had wasted no thought on me. Yet it was good of him : it was pity for me : I should have thanked him.”

“It is more than pity ; he loves you. You must thank him by being his wife, I think, or not at all. Yet, Marian, I will not counsel you. Only it seems to me that you will be truest to your true self if you give yourself to him. Striving to make him happy, you will yourself be happy. No doubt there is always gain in loss in that far end which our short-sighted vision seldom sees. Perhaps, for you, dear child, even

here in this world, there is gain in loss. If Herbert is not what he was, if he can only love you now with half a heart, it may be that this half you gain now is less unworthy of you than the whole you lost before. So, even here, Marian, where your reward, and the reward of such as you, is not, you may find gain in loss."

THE END.

THE SELECT LIBRARY OF FICTION.

VOL.

- 53 A Day's Ride; or, a Life's Romance *Charles Lever.*
- 54 Maurice Tiernay *Charles Lever.*
- 55 Constable of the Tower
W. H. Ainsworth.
- 58 Master of the Hounds "Scrutator."
- 60 Cardinal Pole; an Historical Novel
W. H. Ainsworth.
- 61 Jealous Wife *Miss Pardoe.*
- 62 Rival Beauties *Miss Pardoe.*
- 63 The Hunchback of Notre-Dame
Victor Hugo.
- 65 Lord Mayor of London
W. H. Ainsworth.
- 66 Elsie Venner
Oliver W. Holmes.
- 67 Charlie Thornhill *Charles Clarke.*
- 68 House of Elmore
Author of "Grandmother's Money."
- 72 Country Gentleman "Scrutator."
- 73 La Beata *T. Adolphus Trollope.*
- 74 Marietta *T. Adolphus Trollope.*
- 75 Barrington *Charles Lever.*
- 76 Beppo the Conscript
T. Adolphus Trollope.
- 77 Woman's Ransom
F. W. Robinson.
- 78 Deep Waters *Anna H. Drury.*
- 79 Misrepresentation
Anna H. Drury.
- 80 Tilbury Nogo *Whyte Melville.*
- 82 He Would Be a Gentleman
Samuel Lover.
- 83 Mr. Stewart's Intentions
F. W. Robinson.
- 84 Mattie: a Stray
Author of "Owen: a Waif."
- 85 Doctor Thorne *Anthony Trollope.*
- 86 The Macdermots of Ballycloran
Anthony Trollope.
- 87 Lindisfarn Chase *T. A. Trollope.*

VOL.

- 88 Rachel Ray *Anthony Trollope.*
- 89 Luttrell of Arran *Charles Lever.*
- 90 Giulio Malatesta *T. A. Trollope.*
- 91 Wildflower *F. W. Robinson.*
- 92 Irish Stories and Legends
Samuel Lover.
- 93 The Kellys and the O'Kellys
Anthony Trollope.
- 94 Married Beneath Him
Author of "Lost Sir Massingberd."
- 95 Tales of all Countries
Anthony Trollope.
- 96 Castle Richmond *A. Trollope.*
- 98 John Law, the Projector
W. H. Ainsworth.
- 99 Jack Brag *Theodore Hook.*
- 100 The Bertrams
Anthony Trollope.
- 101 Faces for Fortunes
Augustus Mayhew.
- 102 Father Darcy
Mrs. Marsh Caldwell.
- 103 Time the Avenger
Mrs. Marsh Caldwell.
- 104 Under the Spell
F. W. Robinson.
- 105 Market Harborough
Whyte Melville.
- 106 Slaves of the Ring
F. W. Robinson.
- 110 Emilia Wyndham
Mrs. Marsh Caldwell.
- 111 One and Twenty
F. W. Robinson.
- 112 Douglas's Vow
Mrs. Edmund Jennings.
- 113 Woodleigh
F. W. Robinson.
- 114 Theo Leigh *Annie Thomas.*
- 116 Orley Farm. 3s.
Anthony Trollope.

THE SELECT LIBRARY OF FICTION.

VOL.

- 117 Flying Scud *Charles Clarke.*
- 118 Denis Donne *Annie Thomas.*
- 119 Forlorn Hope *Edmund Yates.*
- 120 Can You Forgive Her? 3s.
Anthony Trollope.
- 121 Ned Locksley, the Etonian
Anonymous.
- 122 Miss Mackenzie
Anthony Trollope.
- 123 Carry's Confession
By Author of "Mattie: a Stray."
- 125 Belton Estate *Anthony Trollope.*
- 126 Land at Last *Edmund Yates.*
- 127 Dumbleton Common
Hon. Eleanor Eden.
- 128 Crumbs from a Sportsman's
Table *Charles Clarke.*
- 129 Bella Donna *Percy Fitzgerald.*
- 130 Captain Jack *J. A. Maitland.*
- 131 Christie's Faith
By Author of "Mattie: a Stray."
- 132 Polly: a Village Portrait
By a Popular Writer.
- 133 75 Brooke Street
Percy Fitzgerald.
- 134 Called to Account
Annie Thomas.
- 135 A Golden Heart
Tom Hood.
- 136 Second Mrs. Tillotson
Percy Fitzgerald.

VOL.

- 137 Never Forgotten
Percy Fitzgerald.
- 138 Clyffards of Clyffe
Author of "Married Beneath Him."
- 139 Which is the Winner
Charles Clarke.
- 140 Archie Lovell
Mrs. Edwards.
- 141 Lizzie Lorton
E. Lynn Linton.
- 142 Milly's Hero
F. W. Robinson.
- 143 Leo
Dutton Cook.
- 144 Uncle Silas *J. S. Lefanu.*
- 145 Bar Sinister *Charles A. Collins.*
- 146 Rose Douglas
By a Popular Writer.
- 147 Cousin Stella; or, Conflict
Mrs. C. Jenkin.
- 148 Highland Lassies
Erick Mackenzie.
- 149 Young Singleton
Talbot Gwynne.
- 150 The Eve of St. Mark
Thomas Doubleday.
- 151 Young Scapegrace
James Payne.
- 152 Mirk Abbey
Author of "Married Beneath Him."
- 153 Fair Carew: or, Husbands and
Wives *Catherine Bigger.*
- 154 Riverston
Georgiana M. Craik.

OTHER VOLUMES IN PREPARATION.

London: CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, Piccadilly.

STANDARD AUTHORS.

ONE SHILLING.

Fcap. 8vo, with Illustrated Covers, and well printed on good paper.

This series of "Standard Novels," of which upwards of fifty volumes have been issued, has now secured for itself a *standard* place in popular estimation. As these works have been before the public already in other forms, it is unnecessary to go into detailed criticism of their merits and demerits. But as the merits, on the whole, greatly overbalance the demerits, we gladly recommend to the favourable notice of our readers the excellent series of "Standard Authors," which are precisely the kind of book to put in one's pocket when lounging away a summer holiday by the seaside or elsewhere, when one wants only to be amused and not to be either greatly moved or to have to put forth any serious effort of thought. It is absurd to make a task of pleasure or a toil of relaxation. So we object to grave works for holiday-time—even the novel philosophic we ignore; and therefore at this season we betake ourselves to amusing, but not fatiguing, novels of society, such as those embraced in this popular shilling series, and of which the late issues are not the least interesting.

When ordering, the Numbers only need be given.

VOL.

1 Confidences
By Author of "Carr of Carrlyon."

2 Erlesmere; or, Contrasts of
Character. *By L. S. Lavenue.*

3 Nanette and Her Lovers
By Talbot Gwynne.

4 Life and Death of Silas Barn-
starke. *By Talbot Gwynne.*

6 Tender and True
By Author of "Clara Morison."

7 Gilbert Messenger *By Holme Lee.*

8 Thorney Hall *By Holme Lee.*

9 My Lady: a Tale of Modern
Life

10 The Cruellest Wrong of All
By Author of "Margaret."

VOL.

11 Lost and Won
By Georgiana M. Craik.

12 Hawkswiew *By Holme Lee.*

14 Florence Templar *By Mrs. F. Vidal.*

16 Wheat and Tares: a Modern
Story

17 Guilty Peace; or, Amberhill
By A. I. Barrowcliffe.

20 My First Season
By Author of "Charles Auchester."

21 The White House by the Sea.
A Love Story

23 Arrows in the Dark
By Author of "Said and Done."

24 Moulded Out of Faults; or,
Adrian L'Estrange

CHARLES LEVER'S WORKS.

RAILWAY EDITION,

WITH PICTURE COVERS BY A. K. BROWN (PHIL).

- Jack Hinton, the Guardsman. 2s.
Harry Lorrequer. 2s.
The O'Donoghue: an Irish Tale. 2s.
Barrington. 2s.
The Fortunes of Glencore. 2s.
Luttrell of Arran. 2s.
Sir Jasper Carew. 2s.
Maurice Tiernay. 2s.
A Day's Ride. 2s.
One of Them. 2s.
Charles O'Malley. 750 Pages. 3s.
The Daltons. 708 Pages. 3s.
Knight of Gwynne. 630 Pages. 3s.
Dodd Family Abroad. 672 Pages. 3s.
Tom Burke of "Ours." 704 Pages. 3s.
Davenport Dunn. 772 Pages. 3s.
Roland Cashel. 618 Pages. 3s.
Martins of Cro' Martin. 704 Pages. 3s.

The collected works of CHARLES LEVER in a uniform series must, like the Novels of Scott, Bulwer, Dickens, and Thackeray, find a place on the shelves of every well-selected library. No modern production of fiction have gained a greater reputation for their writer; few authors equal him in the humour and spirit of his delineation of character, and none surpass him in lively descriptive power and never-flagging story: and the whole People of the United Kingdom has lavished the highest encomiums upon his works.

The above can be had in sets of 18 vols., bound in cloth gilt, price £3.

SOLD BY ALL BOOKSELLERS, AND AT THE RAILWAY STATIONS.

